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## AMBULANCE IN AFRICA

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# Ambulance

## I N A F R I C A

BY  
E V A N T H O M A S



D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY  
INCORPORATED

New York

London

1943

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*To*

A.D.R.





## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Author has not attempted in this short history to give a composite picture of the American Field Service or of the desert campaigns of the British Eighth Army. The book is the personal story of an American college boy who in the fall of 1941 sailed for the Middle East to serve as an ambulance driver.

E. T.



## CONTENTS

	PAGE
PROLOGUE: PRINCETON, 1941 . . . . .	1
CHAPTER	
I. TROOPSHIP . . . . .	5
II. INDIA . . . . .	24
III. TEWFIK TO TOBRUK . . . . .	34
IV. DEFEAT . . . . .	54
V. MINQUAR QUAM . . . . .	80
VI. ALAMEIN LINE . . . . .	102
VII. TEMPORARY GENTLEMAN . . . . .	121
VIII. VICTORY . . . . .	133
IX. GOING HOME . . . . .	164
EPILOGUE: NEW YORK, 1943 . . . . .	173

## ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.C.	Ambulance Car Company
A.D.M.S.	Assistant Director of Medical Services (top medical officer in British divisions)
A.D.S.	Advance Dressing Station
A.F.S.	American Field Service
C.C.S.	Casualty Clearing Station
D.A.D.M.S.	Deputy A.D.M.S.
M.A.C.	Motor Ambulance Convoy
M.D.S.	Main Dressing Station
N.A.A.F.I.	Navy, Army, Air Force Institute (a British Forces canteen service)
R.A.P.	Regimental Aid Post
R.M.O.	Regimental Medical Officer
Kiwi	New Zealand soldier
Tommy	British soldier

## AMBULANCE IN AFRICA



## *Prologue*

PRINCETON, 1941

"You make me sick," said Butch as he gathered up his R.O.T.C. maps and headed for his own room. Gene looked at me and smiled.

"Butch will be a general some day," I said.

"At least he may graduate from college—which is more than either of us will do at this rate."

I mumbled something about "Poor Butch" (thus putting the finishing touches on our routine week-night nine o'clock ritual) and settled down to a lengthy discussion about the war—or maybe about girls, or Thomas Wolfe, or rowing, or people we didn't like. As I remember, those were the main topics of conversation between Gene and myself at that time.

The three of us had roomed together during junior year and had enjoyed ourselves in many and various ways. Now that senior year was five weeks old we were still managing to live together fairly peaceably and had even added some new pleasures to our everyday existence. For one thing, I had managed to persuade the director of the Athletic Association that a telephone would be a useful addition to my life. The telephone had just been installed, and I wor-

shipped it tremendously as a symbol of all sorts of things, particularly as a symbol of minor prestige. Then the janitor had presented us with a wooden ice-box, and we'd stocked it with beer. To make life even more complete, we'd bought a new phonograph attachment to our radio (on credit) and André Kostalanitz and his orchestra made the evening mel-low with renderings of "All the Things You Are," and so on.

At times like this the war seemed a long way off, and yet at odd moments of the day or night I'd sometimes get a sickening feeling that it wasn't so far off really and some time in the not too distant future I'd have to rush off and leave the life of friends and conversation and beer and Princeton that I had learned to be so fond of. I never had the feeling that we were wickedly fiddling while Rome burned, nor do I feel now that my college days were in any real sense wrong or shallow. The sickening feeling was really a mixture of fear and bewilderment. The war seemed so wrong to me that I wanted to have nothing to do with it; or I felt I should accept the inevitable and go quickly before I had a chance to think about it too much. Aside from—or perhaps I should say alongside of—this subjective emotional feeling about the war, I was ready to argue at any time of the day or night that it meant national suicide for us to enter the war, and I always entertained grave and vociferous doubts as to whether the British Empire was fighting our war, or Freedom's war, or any other war that was not a be-



lated attempt at survival. It seemed to me that the war could end only in a stalemate of exhaustion with very little left of the liberty we prized, other than perhaps a few meaningless phrases turned into weapons of hate and intolerance.

Perhaps I'd seen too many pictures of Mayor Hague's bully boys acting in the name of "Americanism." The only "get up and go to war" argument that had ever really shaken my stanch isolationism was that employed by an older friend of mine, who stated simply enough that the house of our neighbors was being burned by the worst kind of criminals and it was high time we should do something about it. Perhaps, at times, I did have a twinge of conscience at the spectacle of brave men fighting with their backs to the wall—very much alone.

At any rate I knew that there was something very big going on; something that might just possibly require more than a rationalized abhorrence if any sort of understanding was to be reached.

Sometimes—and especially during my long conversations with Gene, who was by way of being a very exceptional person—I'd get to thinking about moving around and seeing things for myself. At such times I was quite ready to rush off and do anything. So it happened that when an old friend of mine, back from various adventures with the British Ambulance Corps, wandered into the room on such a typical evening and announced his intention of sailing for Egypt with the American Field Service, I immediately took interest. Within four days I had

resigned from college (leaving a few bills unpaid and several papers unwritten), received my family's blessings, and was more or less signed, sealed, and delivered into the hands of the A.F.S.

## *Chapter I*

### TROOPSHIP

In spite of the fact that I always liked to think of myself as something of a radical during my years of prep school and college, I must confess that I did acquire certain very conservative and mellow tastes. I acquired a marked partiality for gray flannel suits, black sweaters with the proper six-inch letter on the back (not too big), and people who laughed at the right time. Needless to say, it was something of a shock to find myself dumped on a huge troopship with a hundred other Americans of every type and description—to say nothing of six thousand Englishmen who reminded me not at all of a brief visit to the Henley Royal Regatta in the summer of 1938. As I remember now, I alternated between feeling like a very small boy far away from home and a very superior being, smugly convinced that most of these people were utterly beyond the pale.\*

Of course I had given myself all sorts of stern

\* The first unit of the American Field Service to sail for the Middle East was made up of a hundred men varying in age from nineteen to fifty-five. They were recruited from all parts of the country on a voluntary basis without pay. The group assembled in New York and entrained for a Canadian convoy port on November 6, 1941. The largest groups came from California and New York.

little lectures on the importance of keeping an open mind and a stiff upper lip, but nevertheless I was a ready victim of disillusionment and consequent discouragement. For one thing, I had imagined that a group of ambulance drivers, rushing off to a war not necessarily their own, would be a mixture of three parts idealistic humanitarians to one part "soldier of fortune." It hadn't even occurred to me that I came under neither of these headings myself. I guess I expected to find rough diamonds—but still obvious diamonds. For another thing, my preconceived notions about England and Englishmen were rather too heavily drawn from *Cavalcade*, Rudyard Kipling, and jolly boating weather—in spite of my "hard-headed" isolationism.

Needless to say, my discouragement was premature. It seems that during two long days and one long night of traveling toward our port of embarkation, I had been very superficially observing my new companions of the American Field Service. For the most part we (although I didn't include myself at the time) looked tired and frowsy and generally down on our luck. For all the world like a lot of fifth-rate brush salesmen, with a few unfrocked ministers thrown in, sitting on a train going nowhere. The rest of our adventurous group was made up of that minority which managed somehow to maintain a continuous and unbelievable state of intoxication. These were the soldiers of fortune—or misfortune—when the flesh could not keep pace with the spirit.

By the time our convoy had made its impressive

way out of the cold northern port, my first shock of meeting my comrades-without-arms was over, and I was giving more attention to the problem of troopship life and close association with countless numbers of Englishmen who were fast losing the glamour of full packs, gleaming buttons, and the stirring strains of "Tipperary."

The first forty-eight hours on board the transport were something like the first two days in a new school. Homesickness and smugness were temporarily set aside as I nerved myself to the business of eating and sleeping, and maybe even washing, among so many strange people. For that brief period I looked upon the English soldiers as older boys and was impressed beyond measure as I saw them singing and laughing with all the proper nonchalance and swagger that older boys should possess. Never having had anything to do with the military before, I was so properly subdued that I even forgot to worry about whether or not the A.F.S. boys were all that I had imagined they should be.

After the first few days, however, all sorts of things began to change. Life had become considerably more routine, and the business of waiting in line for a meal was no longer an adventure; an atmosphere of boredom and discontent began to settle over large portions of the ship. Furthermore, we had made considerable progress to the south, and the heat was terrific.

The British had discarded their winter uniforms, and the ship seemed overrun with bad-smelling,

pasty-looking men dressed in oversized shorts. They used to play a game called "'ousey-'ousey"—a kind of bingo—and the air was filled from morning to night with numbers yelled out and repeated in the oddest accent I had ever heard. To make life even more unpleasant, practically the entire ship's company was fast coming to the conclusion that not only that particular ship, but the world in general, could do very nicely without the A.F.S. This feeling was brought to a head one evening when one of our number staged a one-man drunken riot and had to be carried off to the brig.

We were berthed in regular troop quarters—twenty men in a cabin meant for two—on a long corridor which was constantly teeming with an overflow of ambulance drivers and Tommies. I had the misfortune to be living in the same cabin with the one-man riot. It really was a sensational and climactic affair. We had already attracted more than our share of notice by virtue of the fact that we were completely without training or discipline of any sort. At best we weren't an impressive sight. We were dressed in the oddest assortment of civilian and "military" clothes the world has ever seen. We had much too much baggage to fit in our given space. We hadn't the vaguest notion how to keep ourselves or our cabins neat and clean. We either couldn't understand or wouldn't read the formal rules and regulations, and our officers managed to keep themselves well over on the proper side of

those boldly painted lines which marked the end of our world and the outer perimeter of theirs.

Of course, the key to the whole situation was lack of experience with any sort of military life or discipline. Under the proper circumstances our officers could very well have left us completely alone with full confidence that we would settle into a normal routine as a matter of course. It wasn't any one's fault particularly, since the main object was to get us overseas in a hurry and train us later. Our officers were simply obeying the old precept: when in Rome do as the Romans do, and the Romans (or British officers in this case) quite naturally spent very little time playing mother to their men.

Had things been different, the ninety per cent of us who were normal, healthy escapists (with perhaps more than a touch of idealism and restlessness thrown in) might have learned to understand and even appreciate one another in short order. Certainly we might have learned not to confuse one another and the organization as a whole with the meager ten per cent who left a trail of shame and bad repute over half the world before they were gradually eliminated.

Things being as they were, it's small wonder that some of us, including myself, were guilty of what might be called a bad mental attitude. There's nothing wrong with complaining about heat, crowding, five-thirty reveille, boredom, and so on, but it got to the point where I couldn't enjoy the company of any except a very "select" group of people, and

where I became extremely critical of most of the Tommies, partly because I couldn't understand what they were saying (or wouldn't) and partly because Englishmen really do look odd when they're fresh out of England and stripped down to those short pants they wear. I was unhappy about the A.F.S. simply because I never could get detached enough to accept people for what they were instead of for what circumstances and my own lack of understanding made them seem to be. In spite of my "bad attitude" it wasn't so very long before I ran across a certain number of people in our ranks whom I immediately respected—and craved the respect of.

There were older men like John Wylie, Fred Hoing, and Chan Ives—trained teachers and lawyers who had given up their civilian occupations because they were really interested in doing a job of work in this war. There was Andy Geer, a professional writer, who had been something of a boxer and football star at the University of Minnesota in the twenties. Andy had seen a lot of the world and planned to see some more, but that didn't keep him from wanting to do a real job while he was at it. Then there were younger men—Tom DePew, late of Colgate and Oxford, who was the most amazingly Christian person I had ever run across in my young life. I must confess I thought he was kidding some one at first, but no, as a matter of fact the guy actually had a sense of humor. Bob Sullivan was another character—a top-flight amateur heavyweight boxer, he managed to mix a genuine kindness with an Irish



toughness and sincere love of adventure. Another boy for whom I acquired a tremendous admiration from the first was Bill Nichols, a Harvard lad who was the most honest-to-God gentleman, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, that ever lived. It was impossible for Bill to do anything without giving it his best. Of course, there were other men who were immediately outstanding from many points of view, but I always thought of the really outstanding people as being something separate and apart from the Field Service as a whole.

I can't pretend that I suddenly came under the influence of the high type of men and changed my outlook overnight. I just don't learn that quickly. But I did begin to find certain pleasures in life, and by the time the voyage was three weeks old and we were beginning to speculate on our position in relation to the South African coast, I had arrived at the point where I could wake up in the morning and put a very good face on the prospect of another day at sea.

The daily routine, which started off with reveille and stand-to with life-jackets at 5:30 A.M. and ended with lights out at 9 P.M., included nothing more strenuous than three meals a day, an inspection of quarters, and perhaps an occasional lecture on army organization or first aid. I'm afraid I can not boast of any great hardship, and we were so well convoyed that danger was almost non-existent. The most annoying thing about daily life was that we had to eat our meals off long wooden shelves, standing

throughout, squeezed in with a tremendous crowd of soldiers. The main problem of the day was what to do between meals. Every inch of the ship either below decks or above was crowded with troops—except, of course, the forbidden territory reserved for officers or ship's crew. For a while it seemed that the only way to pass the time was either being jammed up in one's bunk, going slowly mad to the rhythm of housey-housey numbers being shouted up and down the corridor, or leaning up against the rail on deck, watching the water go by. The main trouble with the latter alternative was the fact that it had the same rush-hour atmosphere as the mess hall without benefit of food. Finally some of us hit upon a solution of sorts. We dug up some boxing gloves and disported ourselves on that portion of the deck reserved for petty officers. Apparently the petty officers were laboring under the illusion that we were training there for some sensational affair, because they never saw fit to throw us out. So it happened that I was introduced to the world of amateur boxing.

I always think of the hours spent on our special deck with a great deal of pleasure. I didn't enjoy being pommelled about very much, but it was good exercise, and it really was a wonderful opportunity to get out in the sun and to appreciate the impressive spectacle of a well-escorted convoy. For reasons I can not mention here, we were so well escorted that the number of navy craft accompanying us was almost double the number of troopships. One couldn't

help feeling at times like the King of England reviewing his fleet as our guardians went through their paces. I never tired of watching them, because there was always something new to see. I could always count on either a new formation or at least new background supplied by the ever-changing scenery of sky and sea.

I got into the habit of going up to our special deck practically every day. At first I didn't like to go there when there were too many people around, because I was such a poor boxer; so Ken Ungerman, a good friend of mine, used to spar with me until I finally lost some of my self-consciousness, and as we approached Capetown I was ready to think about entering a novice boxing tournament.

By the time we had been to sea for three or four weeks I'd pretty much forgotten about America and her problems, though I still took time out occasionally to argue with Fred Hoing or Chan Ives about the advisability of our staying out of the war. I knew from the ship's bulletins that the Japanese Government was talking things over with ours, and I knew that Roosevelt had told the Japs that he'd like to see them behave themselves, but I didn't figure that the United States was in any position to do anything about it, and the question seemed largely academic to me.

On the night of December 7th I was lying in my bunk, thinking about all the food I was going to eat in Capetown, when suddenly the word came round that the Japs had attacked Pearl Harbor. "I don't

believe it," said I—largely out of habit, since it was always advisable to believe nothing that any one told you on that floating rumor factory. Yet suddenly I felt that it was true. My immediate mechanical reaction was to join the crowd in the hallway who were saying pretty much what every other American was saying at the time.

We certainly said some silly things: "Yellow bastards." "Beat 'em in two weeks." "Sink their navy." "They must be out of their minds." "How about Hitler?" "We'll finish this war off properly now." "What in hell are we doing in this limey outfit? Our own country's been attacked and I am not going to stay here: no, sir, I'm going home and fight the Japs." And so on, far into the night. Needless to say I put in my share of nonsense. I was in a great mood for nonsense because I wanted to feel that now we were in it maybe we actually could see it through in a hurry and perhaps do an overnight job on the brave new world I'd heard so much about.

When I finally crawled back into my bunk it was with a sick heart in spite of all the fighting words. I was terribly homesick—not just for home and family but for the kind of world I'd lived in. The thought of any sort of new world, brave or otherwise, suddenly became frightening. I thought of the schools I'd gone to and the friends I'd left; of hockey games and crew races and summers spent on the Sound, sailing my own boat or trying to teach kids to handle boats so that they could get the same thrill that I did out of matching their skill and luck and

sense of "feel" with that of others. I may have been living in an evil world in the larger sense, but I had led a very happy life. So much for my immediate reaction to the dreadful news.

In the morning the entire ship was buzzing with news of the Pearl Harbor tragedy and for the next three days we stood around talking, through our hats. One thing that bothered some of us, particularly in the cold light of day, was that now our dream of returning to a peaceful and hero-worshipping America at the end of our year's enlistment was shattered. Also some of us who had felt rather adventurous about rushing off to war were unpleasantly disturbed to think that, even in America, there would soon be nothing very spectacular about any one rushing off to anything. Something of a let-down. In war time you really do have to glamorize what you're doing in order to get the proper thrill of conceit.

There was only the space of three or four days between the news of Pearl Harbor and our arrival in Capetown. For some reason the sight of land put the war practically out of our minds, and we turned our attention to speculations and rumors about shore leave and the prospect of enjoying the world-famous hospitality of the South Africans.

When you've been cooped up on a troopship for over a month, any sort of land is sure to be appreciated. However, it would require a first-rate poet to describe the joy that the sight of Capetown brought to our hearts. Even from a distance we could tell that

Capetown was just what the doctor ordered. The climate at that time of year was spring-like; the city looked sparkling and clean and modern in the best sense, and the surrounding country-side was a delightful composite of spectacular hills rising above green and prosperous fields and valleys.

It seemed to take our ship forever to get to the quayside and tie up. Hours before there was any possibility of going ashore we were dressed and polished to a point where we looked almost military. The Tommies were suddenly transformed into smart-looking soldiers in their tropical uniforms and sun helmets, and I noticed for the first time that somehow they had snatched sufficient sunshine and exercise on board so that their deathly pallor had given way to a reasonably healthy complexion. The entire atmosphere of the ship had changed. For the first time every one was getting along with every one else—except, of course, for the fact that we all joined in an unreasoning hatred of any power, naval or military, which might keep us from getting ashore without delay.

Finally we were informed that the ship would spend at least four days in port and that we would all be granted daily shore leave, provided we behaved ourselves and reported back by 11:59 each night. Our immediate reaction was mixed: "Four days sound good, but I'll be damned if I'll come back to this tub every night."

My own visit to Capetown was not too exciting: suffice it to say that I went swimming daily, did a

certain amount of drinking and an awful lot of eating, and thus enjoyed myself tremendously. I was thoroughly impressed by the South Africans. They may have their racial and minority problems, and they probably have no intention of creating a political world of equality for all, but they certainly have a beautiful country and are about the nicest people, on the whole, that one could ever hope to meet.

Some of my good friends managed to spend their nights ashore, in contravention of regulations, and I came very close to joining them. A combination of ambition and the fact that some of the older people whom I respected felt so strongly on the subject accounted for my religious observance of the rules—though I do think there was much to be said for those who viewed the matter from the stay-ashore angle.

As usual there were a certain number of Field Service boys who diligently applied themselves to the task of seeing to it that the A.F.S. was publicly shamed by their individual actions: wearing campaign ribbons and decorations which the wearers had never won the right to display, leaving unpaid hotel bills, and doing some unduly raucous tipping just as a starter.

It was hard to leave Capetown when the time came and even harder to settle down to troopship life once more. There was a good deal of speculation as to our next stop. I think that we were all hoping and praying that it might be Port Tewfik

(Suez) or at least somewhere in that general direction, but we were doomed to disappointment.

It soon appeared that the novice boxing tournament was about to start, and so, with considerable trepidation, I lined up for the great weighing-in ceremony one morning. Every time I'd look at one of the hundreds of soldiers in line I'd breathe a silent prayer: "Oh, God, I hope I don't have to fight that bruiser!" I couldn't understand why the Tommies had ever seemed small and pale. What could I have been thinking of? When I learned that I was to fight in the lightweight class (I weighed 136), I immediately had some one point out a lightweight to me. There was never such a grizzly-looking customer.

I had a few days of grace in which to "practise up"—that is to say, Bob Sullivan let me poke at him and then clouted me in an offhand manner. Then one evening came the awful summons to present myself on the sports deck at ten o'clock the following morning. I was really ready for the big fight. My left shoulder began to ache—I'm left-handed—I decided I had an awful cold in the head, and I had worn a groove in the passage leading to the W.C.

Morning finally came, and at ten o'clock my disgustingly cheerful seconds (Andy Geer and Bob Sullivan) poured me into the ring. I never felt worse in my life. There across the ring from me was a smallish British infantryman. I must admit that he was small, but then, hadn't I read some place that British soldiers learn Commando tactics? To make matters worse, I suddenly realized that this fellow was going



to try and beat me up in front of an awful lot of people.

"Hit him in the stomach," said Andy.

"This is going to be easy," said Bob.

"How do you mean?" said I.

All of a sudden I found myself standing alone in the ring with my opponent. Obviously I was expected to do something about it. With a strength born of sheer nervousness I hit him in the face with a left. Nothing happened. I hit him again with a left to the stomach. He bent over slightly, and the expression on his face was such that I half expected him to say: "Pardon me, but I can't quite hear you." In desperation I threw a wild right-hand punch. To my complete surprise the guy fell down. I didn't know what to make of it and stood there gaping at him for a bit until Andy shouted me back to the corner. The boy got back up on his feet.

"Jesus!" thought I. "He's going to want to hit me now."

As a matter of fact I guess he did hit me a couple of times, but I landed one more lucky punch, and, to my great joy, they stopped the fight and waved a little red flag signifying that I had won.

I never felt better in my life. In fact, I felt so well that I almost forgot to shake hands with my erstwhile opponent. He really was very small, and his mouth was bleeding, and he looked more hurt with me than angry. I felt a little foolish just for a second, but I got over it in plenty of time to climb out of the

ring just as I'd seen Joe Louis do in the movies—but feeling about twice as tough as Joe ever did.

I continued to feel twice as tough as Joe Louis, imagining as I swaggered around the ship that all eyes were glued upon my marvelous physique, all voices whispering, "There goes Killer Thomas," until the dreadful day when I was notified that the time had come for me to meet my second opponent. Unfortunately, this new threat belonged to the same regiment as the late lamented; furthermore, he proved to be a rather better physical specimen. I had the misfortune to meet this fellow before we went into the ring. Trying to make conversation, so that he wouldn't be too mad at me, I asked him if he were as nervous as I.

"Yes," said he.

"Impossible," thought I.

Still, I went into this second fight with a certain amount of confidence that it was possible for me to win. Bob Sullivan advised me to try to finish the fight off quickly, so I started out with a great rush. At first things looked very promising. At the end of a minute I had my man crouching by the ropes and was unharmed myself. I backed away slightly, planning to hit him with everything I had just as soon as he should straighten up enough so that I could see him. I guess I must have let my mind wander momentarily because the next thing I knew he had come out of his lair and was delivering some very effective blows. This was quite a different story from my first fight: I'd been hit fairly hard, and didn't know how

to clinch, so I stood there wasting my energy on a lot of wild and ineffectual punches that couldn't have bothered him in the slightest. As the round ended and I returned to my corner I found that I was suddenly terribly tired. The interval between rounds was taken up by Sullivan, telling me how it was "in the bag," and a doctor, examining a cut under my eye which proved to be nothing serious.

I started the second round with better science than I had finished the first. Again I managed to get my man against the ropes, only this time he got in a few good punches beforehand. He came away from the ropes, clinched, and suddenly delivered such a beautiful punch that I spun completely around and thought seriously of lying down for a nice rest. Somehow I managed to resist the temptation and kept on fighting—more or less. These preliminary fights were only two rounds long, so the fight ended with both of us gasping for breath and pawing at each other. We weren't in A-1 condition.

We were kept sitting in our corners for a bit while the judges made their decision. There were two judges, and their votes were split. Properly enough, the referee awarded the fight to my opponent. He was kind enough to make some polite comment before awarding the decision, and I was well pleased enough to be able to make a fairly dignified exit from the tournament. However I didn't feel exactly like superman any more.

Some of my friends were also in this tournament. Tom DePew, who was fighting in the same weight

class as myself, managed to put away three of his opponents before bowing to the fourth in a truly spectacular battle. Of course, Bob Sullivan was the heavyweight champion of the ship, having won his crown in a special tournament prior to the novice bouts. The boy who defeated me was put out of the tournament on a default in the quarter finals, so at least I did not have to see him beaten.

By the time I had finished my ring career, Christmas was almost at hand, and we had learned, much to our surprise, that the ship's convoy was headed for Bombay and would arrive some time during Christmas week. Christmas Eve was quite a melancholy affair. Some of us had got together and formed a very small glee club which provided us with a real, though brief, pleasure in singing with various groups of Tommies. However, in spite of the singing, the whole ship had an atmosphere of dejection which didn't connote so much a lack of Christmas spirit as a profound and universal homesickness. Furthermore, the ship was bone dry, and we spent most of our time hoping against hope that New Year's Eve on shore might provide us with some sort of cheer.

Christmas Day was nothing very special to most of us except that we did get a turkey dinner and managed to be extra nice to one another. In the afternoon the Brigadier presented the boxing prizes, and I had the good fortune to draw down a dollar watch as a "best loser" prize. That doesn't sound too impressive, but it gave me a terrific thrill to line up with all the other prize-winners on the sports deck

and go through the little ceremony of saluting and shaking hands. As he presented me with my prize, the Brigadier said, "I saw your fight, and I'd rather have this prize than anything." I don't think I'll ever forget that Brigadier as long as I live.

On December 27th we had our final disembarkation inspection, and on the next day we caught our first glimpse of Bombay and the gateway to India.

## *Chapter II*

### INDIA

There are a lot of things floating around in Bombay Harbor, and you can look at it any way you want. Louis Bromfield would (and apparently did) find it hot and sticky in a very romantic way; a travelogue commentator might marvel at the meeting of east and west, and a young American, seeing it for the first time from the deck of a crowded troopship, might make a good many unfavorable comparisons between this and happier anchorages such as Capetown or New York. If you are really interested in dhows and battleships, garbage and minarets, then Bombay is an exciting harbor. Personally, I was interested in the possibility of getting close to some of the more obvious twentieth century luxuries and was rather disappointed in the generally unpromising view.

None of us could understand just why we were in Bombay, and we all had hopes of being transferred immediately to some ship bound for Suez—allowing time for maybe a couple of days' riotous living in the city. It didn't work out that way.

Within twenty-four hours we had been herded into third-class railway carriages, in company with a few

hundred Tommies who had likewise been detached from the convoy, and were heading for the reinforcement center of Deolali, about ninety miles inland from Bombay. Apparently there was no means of transporting us to Suez, and we were to spend a "few days" in camp waiting for a suitable luxury liner.

We had been given a free afternoon and evening in town, and I had spent a morning supervising the unloading of our excessive baggage by the native bearers, so that, by the time we boarded the train, I was already an authority on India. I had decided that the natives on the wharf were slaves to the British Army and to white men in general—at least they did look tired, dirty, and unhappy, and had to listen to an awful lot of abuse from every one, including myself; that the Taj Mahal Hotel was really a nice place and full of some elegant officers, and that all Bombay outside the Taj and environs was an unspeakably dirty place. Most of us had heard fabulous tales of Grant Street, which is lined with brothels, and consequently we spent a good deal of time looking the situation over. Suffice it to say that the situation is not good. In a sailor's tattoo parlor operated by a black midget who looked like a monkey, I had acquired a tattoo in the form of a snake on my left forearm during the course of our half-day's leave, and, as I rode on the train for Deolali, my profound thoughts on India were occasionally interrupted by a genuine concern for the throbbing arm.

I always feel unhealthy on train rides, and this one was no exception. In spite of some beautiful stretches of rolling green country and fine hills, I found it depressing to be sitting there feeling hot and tired, and I wasn't at all sympathetic toward the swarms of native children who crowded along the track screaming, "Baksheesh," (tips) every time we passed through an inhabited area. The inhabited areas were depressing enough in themselves—filthy hovels built of wood and mud, set among crudely irrigated fields and giving off that typically oppressive Indian smell which seems a combination of new-mown grass, urine, and fertilizer.

Now that I had become an authority on all matters pertaining to India and the Indians, I was surprised and disappointed to find that, instead of experiencing the anticipated thrill of righteous disapproval of Imperial Britain, I rather wondered how white men had ever found the necessary energy to exploit this land.\*

At the end of an all-day train ride we arrived at Deolali station and were "marched" out to the reinforcement camp. I have it on good authority that we were mistaken for Italian prisoners.

Deolali isn't a bad place really, and although we were constantly fretful at the delay in getting on our way, we spent a very beneficial month there.

Our officers followed their usual practice of keeping to themselves except on special occasions, and

\* This paragraph merely indicates a fleeting impression and is not meant to be construed as a vindication of the British Raj in India.



Andy Geer, who was by this time a sort of top sergeant, managed to organize a fairly successful daily routine. We slept in rope-and-frame beds in barracks made out of woven matting with concrete floors and were cared for by our own Indian bearers, who were paid a rupee a week (thirty cents) by each of the five or six men served, in return for which the quarters were kept clean, beds tidied, and shoes shined. Laundry was cheap, and it was a wonderful luxury to live in clean clothes for a change, even if the clothes were more or less ruined. The food was terrible (fried onions and some sort of water-buffalo meat for the most part), but it was nice to have a mess hut to sit down in.

Reveille (or as the English say, "Revalley") was blown by a fancy Indian soldier at daybreak, and we were supposed to race out into the icy cold morning and do "PT" (physical training). Then after breakfast and a sort of inspection, we were supposed to drill in the barrack yard—a very hot and dusty business. Most of us didn't do the PT, but we did manage to show up for drill. Our afternoons and evenings were usually free to take trips around the country-side and drink beer in the canteen or stronger spirits in the local hotel. Aside from the fact that we had more free time and a lot less military discipline than the Tommies, our life was that of private British soldiers at a soft camp.

We were divided into three platoons with a platoon leader and sergeant to each platoon, and I was temporarily given the job of a platoon sergeant. This

pleased my ego and ambition, but it was very embarrassing in some ways—particularly as I was supposed to instruct in the fine art of drilling, and I'd never drilled before in my life. At first we must have looked like awful fools to the British soldiery watching us drill, and most of us thought it was silly for ambulance drivers to practise infantry formations; nevertheless, the drilling did us a lot of good. For one thing, it's bound to be worth while to have a hundred individualists who aren't particularly fond of each other do anything together, and for another thing it always helps an individual's *esprit de corps* if he can see his associates looking fairly healthy and uniformly dressed, for a change. Of course, Andy had a terrible time trying to persuade an occasional adventurer that green underwear and rolled stockings weren't exactly fitting for the parade ground, but on the whole we did look respectable, and some of us began to loosen our hold on the conviction that every one besides ourselves in the A.F.S. was a freak.

I spent most of my off-duty hours with Bob Sullivan, the big Irishman; Ken Ungerman, my original boxing instructor; and Homer Spurlock, a sailor who had a sailor's easy attitude about everything but his hatred for the A.F.S. Unfortunately, I gained a certain amount of well-earned unpopularity by trying to live up to their natural swagger—which didn't come very natural to me. However, it was well worth while, for they proved to be three of the best boys that ever lived, and we had a wonderful time together.

The four of us spent our leisure time poking around the near-by "towns," bicycling to the "holy" city of Nasik, about twelve miles away, and drinking up Sullivan's money at the Lemur Hotel—a small local establishment where we were allowed in the officers' bar. Personally, I didn't have the interest or vigor to appreciate many of the local sights. The towns in particular always depressed me, with their atmosphere of poverty and disease and their awful smell. I don't think my depression was caused by mere snobbishness, but rather by the fact that the decay seemed so ageless and so complete that it left me with a weariness which overwhelmed any realization that perhaps this was a challenge to a world engaged in a terrific struggle for a better life.

We did see some beautiful temples which presented a shocking contrast to their surroundings; witness to the fact that if man's life on earth is not all it might be, he can always turn toward the supernatural. That sort of thing may be all right if man can think of this life as nothing but a short period of waiting and preparing for the real thing. Personally, I don't get it.

I kept myself fairly happy during our stay in India largely because I didn't give myself time to sit around thinking gloomy thoughts. It was a good healthy life, with plenty of exercise—especially when a couple of route marches were added to our drilling routine—and I was getting to know and appreciate more people than I'd had a chance for on the ship. I was a bit too busy "swaggering" around to keep touch

with some of the quieter people whom I had looked up to from the beginning, but I saw enough of Tom DePew so that I didn't make too many mistakes. When I'd get disgusted with the Field Service on account of the antics of a few members, Tom would remind me that the important thing was to do my own job as best I could; when I got to feeling unfriendly toward people I couldn't understand, Tom would try to supply me with a better understanding, and when I was feeling low about life in general, Tom did his best to restore my spirits.

The poor boy had to provide a lot of support at odd times, but he never begrudged it in any way.

I'll never forget one particular occasion when I called on Tom for help. I was returning to the barracks from the Lemur Hotel at about eleven o'clock on New Year's Eve when I saw one of the A.F.S. boys stretched out in the middle of the parade ground, stiff but not quite cold. I walked over and picked up the body, but no sooner did I start toward the barracks than the body began to wriggle and moan. "This is getting to be a two-man job," thought I. So I set down my burden and roused Tom out of bed. We picked the boy up and were making good headway when suddenly he came to life, and the three of us hit the ground in a heap.

"I'm going to kill you," said I.

"Go on—kill me; I want to die in India," yelled the body and proceeded to thrash around and chew at the earth. Tom and I got a firmer grip and somehow propelled the screaming hunk of would-be ambu-

lance driver around the corner of the barracks. By this time the entire camp had been awakened: the Tommies were yelling for quiet, and half the Field Service had come out to see the fun. Encouraged by the audience our man went into his act with new vigor. The act was terminated abruptly by the arrival of Andy Geer and the threat of severe discipline—a bluff, since there was no such thing as discipline in the A.F.S. at that time—but before Andy arrived we put in a very embarrassing half hour trying to persuade the character to put off his “death in India” program until another day and let us get some sleep.

There were a number of veteran British soldiers in camp who claimed to have seen action in Egypt and Libya. These soldiers spent a good deal of time filling us new-comers full of harrowing tales of war—all about how they seldom took prisoners but usually despatched their enemies by thrusting a hand grenade between their legs, and so on. These veterans didn’t appeal to me much, but by this time I had acquired a marked respect for the British Tommies. I had now been living among them day in and day out for over two months, and I had to admit that you couldn’t judge them by their stature, the peculiar whiteness of their skins, or their unfamiliar manner of speech. The most amazing thing about the rank and file of the British soldier is his ability to carry on under almost any circumstances. He has a courage, a lack of imagination, and a willingness to fight for the honor and survival of his country, himself,

and his mates, which can't be beat. It must mean an awful lot to be an Englishman. It's hard for an outsider to understand just how much it does mean. British Tommies will crab about their lot in life from morning until dusk. Sometimes they sound as if they were on the verge of mutiny, but British Tommies have always fought and died for England, and their sons will do it, too. Maybe the ordinary English people will demand something more out of life before they are willing to go and fight the next war, but, if they don't get it, they'll probably still "carry on" and hope for better luck next time.

Toward the end of our month in India, Sullivan, Spurlock, Ungerman, and myself were given four days' leave which we spent in Bombay. Our activities were pretty largely confined to sleeping in the Grand Hotel and drinking in the Taj barroom, though we did manage to make our way out to the Towers of Silence, where the Parsees dispose of their dead—in a manner which seems as sensible as any—by exposing their bodies to the tender mercies of the birds, the sun, and the rain. We spent some time with a couple of officers of the Indian Army—one of whom had a phonograph and a large selection of Strauss waltzes, which made me very nostalgic—and we went to a night club where a British sailor stole the show from the belly dancer by chewing and swallowing his beer glass. We didn't find much in the way of female companionship. They were all too fancy or not fancy enough.

When we returned to Deolali we were greeted

with the pleasant news that soon we'd be on our way to Egypt.

One dark night we were marched to the railway station—looking fairly military—and the next day we were embarked on the ancient tub which was to carry us to Suez. The trip was a matter of two weeks and was uneventful enough except that most of us were supposed to sleep in hammocks down in the hold and that the food was terrible and full of animals.

### *Chapter III*

#### TEWFIK TO TOBRUK

As we came in sight of the sandy harbor of Port Tewfik (Suez), with its mass of shipping riding under a blue sky dotted with the sliver shapes of barrage balloons, I experienced a thrill of excitement, heightened by the first small twinges of fear. So we really were going to war! Up to this point I had given little thought to the physical dangers which might lie ahead and still less thought to the actualities of the job we might be expected to do. Although we'd been more or less a part of the war for three months now, still the war had seemed quite vague and unreal, and the business of driving an ambulance had never presented itself as anything more than a slightly dangerous humanitarian pastime which shouldn't provide too severe a test for one's personal adequacy.

Now I had my doubts that I could ever qualify to perform any sort of useful service in such a grim and gigantic game. It was something like entering an important examination in a subject which I had neglected to study properly—only this time I really hadn't cracked a book. It seemed to me that we were a bunch of junior high school kids who had suddenly wandered into a graduate college by mistake.



To make matters worse, we were called to an assembly while waiting for the order to disembark, and Andy Geer (who had acquired a flare for the sensational in his career as short-story writer for *Red Book*) informed us that the honeymoon was over and we could "expect to be in some sort of action within ten days." Luckily, Andy was talking through his hat. As we lined up to go down the gangway I managed to catch a few words with Colonel Richmond, who had flown to Cairo ahead of us to make arrangements for training and equipment. Richmond let slip the information that we could expect to be working shortly, but the work would be in Syria, a lovely, quiet country. I felt much better—though somewhat let down.

Once ashore we were loaded on to three-ton lorries—standing room only—and trundled off toward the Royal Army Service Corps mobilization center. We didn't get on the truck until late afternoon, and it was a long, cold, four-hour ride. I really didn't feel any discomfort, since my mind was taken up with the newness and excitement of passing through this fascinating area which had been converted into a base of service, training, and supply for the army in the Western Desert. As darkness fell, we could see searchlights crisscrossing in the sky, and occasionally we'd pass a brilliantly lighted area surrounded with barbed wire and watch-towers. It all seemed quite romantic. At about ten o'clock we turned off the macadam road on to the gravelly desert and drew up to the cluster of army tents that had been

assigned to us by the Service Corps. Here we were given a very hospitable reception by a number of British soldiers, who served us a hot meal and showed us to our tents. The soldiers seemed quite impressed by the fact that we were Americans, and they certainly went out of their way to be helpful and decent. It meant a lot to us under the circumstances to be able to go directly from the truck to eat and sleep without the usual confusion involved in getting settled at a new camp. When I rolled up in my blankets that night I hardly noticed the stony ground underneath and immediately lapsed into a state of restful unconsciousness which wasn't broken until morning.

At the crack of dawn we were up and going through the soon-to-be-familiar routine of standing in line with our mess kits for a portion of porridge, sausage, and tea. By the light of day I could see that the mobilization center consisted of hundreds of confusingly similar tents pitched in a desolate waste of rocky desert. A few hundred yards away I could see the black road, flanked by a large canteen tent, the "Garrison Cinema," which looked like a wooden barn, and the administrative headquarters tents.

Immediately after breakfast we were drawn up in formation and informed that there was a job waiting for us in Syria but that we were to remain at this center for a couple of weeks for the purpose of drawing equipment, receiving a certain amount of instruction, and being organized into what is known technically as an Ambulance Car Company.

At the risk of being previous, I will explain how

the British system of medical evacuation is organized.

Each infantry battalion or artillery regiment has a medical officer and stretcher-bearers who are part of the battalion or regiment. This medical officer is known as an R.M.O., or Regimental Medical Officer, and he operates what is known as a Regimental Aid Post—usually a truck or a dugout located near the battalion headquarters. This is the first center of treatment for a wounded man.

When a casualty leaves the R.A.P. he becomes involved in the Field Ambulance System. "Field Ambulance" is the name of a medical unit (not a type of vehicle) which, in the case of infantry, theoretically serves a brigade made up basically of three battalions and an artillery regiment. A Field Ambulance has a certain amount of tentage and medical equipment, eight to twelve doctors, a number of medical orderlies, and anywhere from six to twenty ambulances driven by army service corps drivers. The unit is divided into three companies, one of which is sent out to establish an Advance Dressing Station (A.D.S.) somewhere near brigade headquarters, while the remaining two companies establish a Main Dressing Station (M.D.S.) farther to the rear. The ambulances attached to the Field Ambulance have the job of transporting the patients from the R.A.P. to the A.D.S. and on to the M.D.S. The patients are usually carried from the M.D.S. to a Casualty Clearing Station (a sizable mobile hospital) by ambulances belonging to what is known as a Motor Ambulance Convoy.

A Motor Ambulance Convoy is a group of vehicles commanded by a medical corps officer but operated largely by service corps personnel. In theory, the patients are transported from the C.C.S. back to base and general hospitals by ambulances belonging to an Ambulance Car Company. An A.C.C. is part of the service corps and is commanded by a service corps officer, though it must of necessity take direction from the medical authorities. Actually, A.C.C.'s and M.A.C.'s get all mixed up and may be given almost any sort of job. I imagine that we were originally organized as an A.C.C. because we had no medical officer commanding us and because it was simpler to organize us as a bastard service corps unit, since we were to receive service corps equipment and instruction and eventually to have service corps cooks and workshops attached as an integral part of our company.

The Royal Army Service Corps was indeed a good host to us during the next two weeks. They provided us with tents, food, and cooks; they equipped us completely with British uniforms (warm woollen "battle dress"), steel helmets, gas masks, packs, webbing, etc. They loaned us an officer and a number of N.C.O.'s for instruction, and they provided us with vehicles—trucks, motorcycles, and some of the Dodge ambulances the Field Service had shipped over (many of our cars were already in Syria). The Royal Army Service Corps is an organization primarily concerned with transporting supplies and equipment to forward areas and operating light

workshops, supply dumps, and Vehicle Reserve Depots—some of their work has been taken over by the ordnance corps—but they managed to handle the influx of a hundred green Americans as though it were a routine responsibility.

We spent the first two days drawing equipment, and on the third day we found that a detailed plan of organization had been posted, together with a schedule of instruction. We were divided into two platoons with Andy Geer as lieutenant of one platoon and Chan Ives (Yale '30, S.E.C. lawyer) as lieutenant of the other. Captain King, who had been our commander in India, was created commanding officer of the new company, and the other officers who had started out with us, Colonel Richmond, Major Benson, and Lieutenant Ogden, were to hold down the fort in Cairo. A sergeant was created for each platoon, and the platoons were divided into six sections of six men each, under a "section leader" (corporal).<sup>\*</sup> Immediately Captain King had to listen to an awful lot of crabbing about personal dissatisfactions over place or station. The crabbing went on interminably and is probably still going on, but at that time I was pleased enough to find myself a corporal in Geer's platoon, with very good men in my section.

Being a corporal involved some extra work and responsibility, because the N.C.O.'s were obliged to attend special lectures and because I never could

<sup>\*</sup> All A.F.S. officers were accepted according to rank by the British. However, none held either British or American military commissions.

keep track of Sullivan and Spurlock, who were in my section. On the whole, however, I put in two very profitable weeks at the "mob" center. We had a Tommy N.C.O. instructing us in vehicle maintenance, and I couldn't understand what he was saying, but the R.A.S.C. lieutenant who lectured us on map reading, sun compass, prismatic compass, the responsibilities of an N.C.O., and army forms turned out to be the most interesting and successful teacher I've ever run across. The sun compass is a particularly fascinating instrument. It works on the same principle as a sundial—you set the round plate according to course and date, and then, making allowances for time and position, you keep your vehicle headed so that the shadow of the pointer falls on the proper hour and off you go. The dullest part of the lectures had to do with army forms. There are a lot of 'em.

We were required to practise driving the ambulances, trucks, and motorcycles in convoy. I was delighted to find that I could very nearly handle a motorcycle, and I almost enjoyed driving the ambulances. I still wouldn't know a good ambulance from a bad one, but our American Dodges were delightfully new and easy to handle; furthermore, they had as little mechanical trickery as any truck could have, and they were blessed with four-wheel drive. We soon found the value of the four-wheel drive when we took a short run through a sandy stretch of desert.

Now that I was learning something and had actually driven an ambulance for the first time, I began

to feel that maybe the war wasn't so far over our heads after all, and there seemed to be a good chance that we would be able to do a job. As the strangeness wore off, I got a good deal of pleasure out of pretending that I was some sort of soldier, particularly in the evenings when a group of us would go to the "Garrison Cinema" (age-old pictures with the reels in backward sequence) or drink beer in the N.A.A.F.I. (Navy, Army, Air Force Institute). Although we did a lot of complaining about being uniformed as British soldiers, I think we must have all felt a certain thrill at being part of this army which was actually fighting the war.

At the end of two weeks our orders came through to get under way for Syria. Each section leader was given a sheet of convoy orders and assigned a single ambulance and a motorcycle which would be the responsibility of his section. The orders gave full information as to formation, interval—150 yards except through towns—convoy discipline, time, and so forth. Our destination was given as Beyrouth—a two-and-a-half-day trip.

We started off early in the morning, driving in an easterly direction, and within a few hours came to the Suez Canal. We came in sight of the Canal just in time to be thoroughly impressed by the spectacle of a large gray warship seemingly ghosting its way through a sea of sand. At the Canal I left the security of our ambulance and with a beating heart and a tremendous lack of confidence took over the job of riding a motorcycle. The bikes we'd been issued

were light and extremely easy to handle, but it seemed like a terrific adventure to me to find myself suddenly alone and at the mercy of a machine which I hardly knew how to start and had never operated more than fifteen minutes all told, and then in first gear. It took me an hour of experimenting to find that the thing had a third and fourth gear.

Actually, I wasn't supposed to ride the motorcycle at all. But Sullivan, who was supposed to be our main rider, had gone A.W.O.L. a few nights earlier and had lacerated his arm in a fight with a Cairo window-pane. To this day I am grateful to Sully for giving me such a glorious trip. I was bitterly cold most of the time in spite of my woolen battle dress, heavy overcoat, gloves, and crash helmet, but once I got used to the machine, I scarcely noticed the biting February winds as I roared along, pretending I was a motorcycle cop or a very special despatch rider or hardened trooper. I'd hate to take up motorcycling as a business or hobby, but I certainly enjoyed that first thrill of power.

Our first day's journey took us along a winding black tar road through the Sinai desert—miles and miles of mountainous rolling sand—and on the second day we entered Palestine. The Palestine I saw was definitely not part of the "shepherds with their flocks by night" tradition, though it certainly called to mind the Jewish search for a promised land. It's quite an experience to come across the Sinai waste and suddenly find yourself in a country of fertile red soil, fruit trees, and clean white houses. Of course,



we passed through only a thin strip of the country, and that at an ideal time of year, when the warmth of the noonday sun softened the February winds sweeping in from the sea and the air was full of springtime, but what little I saw of Palestine seemed just about ideal to me. Any one who thinks of the Jews as a race of money-lenders who grew rich on the toil of others should take a quick trip through Jewish Palestine and see the beautiful communities the Jews have established through *their own* labors and in the face of every obstacle.

On the third day we crossed the Syrian border and passed through the picturesque French towns which lie on the seacoast beneath the Lebanon Mountains. In the afternoon we arrived at the army transit camp on the outskirts of Beyrouth.

I understand that at one time Beyrouth was widely advertised as the Paris of the Mediterranean. Well, it was rainy and cold while I was there, and I had an awful cold in the head which prompted me to spend all my spare time sitting around the most American-looking hotel in town, the Normandie, so I didn't get much chance to draw any comparisons with the Paris I knew—which was the Paris of the movies. It did occur to me that under proper weather conditions, Beyrouth undoubtedly would have a charm of its own. There is a nice-looking harbor; the houses are mostly white or cream-colored with red roofs, and a fine range of green hills with cultivated terraces rises about the town.

When we first arrived at Beyrouth it was thought

that most of our assignments would be in the vicinity of the town, but after three days of waiting around, our commanding officer received orders that we were to relieve the Australian Service Corps ambulance drivers who had been stationed in small sections all over Syria.

The sections which had been made up back in Egypt were altered to allow larger numbers of drivers for some stations and fewer for others, and I found myself assigned as second in command of a larger section, which was to be stationed at Deir Ez Zer, on the Euphrates. I was very unhappy when I learned that I was no longer in charge of a section of my own—particularly since I didn't at all like the man who had been put over my head. His name was Dick Tevis; he was a big, good-looking California college boy whom I had always thought of as a no-account character who didn't seem to have much besides his looks. For good reasons, he didn't care for me too much either, but by the time we had been thrown together for a few days I learned that Dick was a very capable fellow in his own easy-going way. Anyhow, we got along very well and had some good times together. The section also included my good friends Sullivan and Spurlock; Tom Esten, a first-rate painter; Leo Marx, a big good-natured man who had been driver mechanic in my original section; Jack Pemberton, a law student; and Johnny Nettleton, who was something of a mechanical genius. A very congenial group.

Andy Geer shepherded us to Deir Ez Zer. We were

piled into a couple of spare ambulances (our Field Service cars were already at the post being used by the Australians) and made our way across the beautiful Lebanon Mountains to a transit camp on the outskirts of Damascus and thence across some four hundred miles of open desert to our destination.

Deir Ez Zer turned out to be a collection of mud and plaster houses on the banks of the muddy Euphrates. We were housed in a very nice—though freezing cold—white plaster house situated in an American Presbyterian missionary compound on an island in the middle of the river. The missionary hospital had been taken over by the British Army, and was staffed by a young Scottish captain-doctor and a handful of Indian orderlies.

The Australian ambulance drivers gave us a friendly welcome—though they freely admitted that they were sorry to be relieved of a good soft job—and explained our duties to us. The duties involved nothing more than “indenting” (that is, putting in a request) for “rations,” a word which includes all necessary supplies, once a day at the supply depot; taking care of five ambulances; and perhaps making a trip each week to carry a few venereal disease and dysentery patients to Palmyra—half-way point between Deir Ez Zer and Damascus.

There really was no need for the number of ambulances or the number of men we had at Deir Ez Zer, since the town boasted nothing more in the way of a military establishment than a sub-area headquarters, a small number of engineers, and a few

hundred Indian infantrymen. Consequently, we spent a good deal of time, once we got settled in our quarters, rolled up in our blankets trying to keep warm. We hired an Arab cook who turned out some wonderful crêpes suzettes made with issue marmalade, kept ourselves reasonably well supplied with beer and imported English gin, and generally lived the life of gentlemen of leisure. A strangely unsatisfactory life on the whole.

At first I enjoyed loafing around and found many small pleasures to keep me happy. It used to be great fun to watch Homer Spurlock bartering empty petrol tins for eggs with the Arab children, to argue pacifism with Jack Pemberton, or to mix ersatz cocktails under the expert supervision of Dick Tevis. Sometimes I even overcame my distaste for the "French" (Arab) cafés in town and spent an evening drinking bad wine and listening to a big Irish fusilier from area headquarters sing sentimental songs. After a couple of weeks, however, the life began to wear on me. Aside from a couple of dull rides across flat, uninteresting desert to Palmyra and back, I didn't get a smell of anything that looked like work, and the situation got to be pretty demoralizing. I made up my mind that the Field Service was a no-good organization, never would accomplish anything, and ought to be disbanded immediately. I turned into a strange sort of super-patriot and decided that I had been cut out for the job of Jap-killer and was wasting my talents in the A.F.S.

Every week or so the mail would be brought out

to us from the Field Service company headquarters outside Beyrouth, and we'd catch up on the latest news of the rest of the men. Invariably there would be a story on the activities of one or a number of people (the original "soldiers of fortune") who had stolen an ambulance and gone on a drunken spree, or had added to the good name of the A.F.S. by embarking on a career of theft. Every damn thing from insulting British officers to breaking store windows, and always the same small group which had made life difficult from the first was involved. The thing that drove me crazy was that nobody seemed able to do anything about it all. Of course, this was all a matter of "growing pains," and the bad actors were eventually weeded out, but at the time I was ashamed of the Field Service insignia on my uniform and flooded the company headquarters with letters of "resignation." Actually, I thought I was just too good for the A.F.S. Now that I look back on that period I am thoroughly ashamed of my own lack of faith: the only consolation is that perhaps I might not have had such an insufferable attitude if I hadn't had so much time to sit around and think.

Fortunately for me, my thinking days were numbered. By the kindness of Andy Geer I was put in charge of the ambulance section at Palmyra for the second half of my two-month stay in Syria.

Palmyra was a far cry from the luxury of Deir Ez Zer. In fact, without much alteration, the place could very well have served as a setting for *Beau Geste*. The town itself is a small collection of Arab dwellings

under the shadow of the famous ruins of Queen Zenobia's capital. Outside the town there are three old-fashioned French forts, two of them deserted and one garrisoned by native levy troops under French officers. Together with a signal corps section under the command of a corporal, and a handful of R.A.S.C. men, likewise under a corporal, our ambulance section occupied one of the deserted forts. Aside from the ruins of the ancient city, the only scenery worth looking at for over a hundred miles in any direction was a steep, symmetrical, cone-shaped hill with an old Turkish castle perched on top. I was very fond of that castle, but to my way of thinking the French forts and the town itself could have been, and probably will be, swallowed up by the surrounding wastes of rock and sand without any loss to the world.

The fort we lived in was particularly unattractive. No light, no water—we had to cart it in tins from a well on the other side of town—no sanitation, and very little protection against heat or cold. However, in spite of everything, I was a little better off in Palmyra than I had been at Deir Ez Zer.

I suppose the best thing about Palmyra as far as I was concerned was that here I was boss of my own section, and, although our only "work" consisted of sending a couple of ambulances across the desert to Damascus once a week, I could occupy my mind by playing efficiency expert. I used to write a daily report of everything that happened. I checked each of our five ambulances with the driver mechanic practically every time I saw one of them; I made

countless inventories of our little store of blankets, stretchers, and bed-pans, and I wrote countless official-looking documents pretending that we were in dire need of all sorts of impossible equipment which I knew we'd never get, and sent them off to platoon headquarters in Damascus. I found that if you are really looking for something to do you can even spend time reading the routine orders that are always pouring in from "headquarters" in any even vaguely military organization.

Of course I couldn't spend all my time playing efficiency expert, so I had plenty of time to enjoy the company of the drivers in my new section. I used to argue politics with Jim McGill, a conservative Baltimore lawyer who had a fine sense of humor and an intelligent mind but who was always baiting me with statements such as: "The only reason why some people in America don't get enough to eat is because they're always buying Packard cars." I used to spend a lot of time talking to Ed Pattulo, a recent Northwestern University freshman, about girls and what a terrible place the world was going to be after the war—they were not related subjects. Once I went out fox-shooting with Thane Riley, a naturalist who was collecting specimens for the University of California, and managed to kill a fox, though it took so many shots, and the fox was so badly mangled, that it wasn't any use as a specimen.

Whenever I felt like clearing the cobwebs out of my brain, I'd climb up the hill to the old Turkish castle and sit there looking down at the ruins of the

ancient city, which somehow took on shape and form from that vantage point. I never could appreciate those ruins when I got right up to them: they just seemed like a lot of old rocks.

Our immediate superior at Palmyra was Captain Banerji, in command of the Indian staging section which maintained a sort of overnight hospital in town. Banerji was an Indian Brahmin, a big handsome fellow with one of the kindest and most philosophical minds I've ever run across. I frequently stopped in to visit Banerji, and he'd always greet me with a big smile and—"Ah, Mr. Thomas, I am so glad to see you. Now we'll have some whisky." (I never saw him take a drink himself. It was always for his guests.) Then we would sit down and talk about the war. Banerji hated the war, but he had a sense of duty toward it that came above everything else. He used to tell me that he had learned to "detach" himself from his home and family and the things he loved, so that he could see it through to the end.

I was in Palmyra at the time that the Cripps Mission to India went on the rocks, and I remember asking Banerji why Gandhi was never willing to compromise. To which Banerji replied: "I do not agree with Gandhi myself, but you must remember that Gandhi believes he has found the truth—and there is no compromise with the truth."

I was quite upset by the course of events in those days, and I once had a long conversation with my Indian friend about what a bloody mess the world had got itself into. I'll never forget Banerji's closing



remark to this conversation. He said: "After all, there must be some power for good in the world. You and I are entirely different by age, nationality, race, and religion, and yet we sit here, we talk as two human beings, and we understand one another."

Besides being a philosopher, Banerji was also one of the most tolerant men in the world. One time I got very irritated with the French commandant of the local garrison, who was always trying to bluff me into lending him our ambulances and drivers, even though he could have got all the ambulances he wanted if he'd taken the trouble to go through the proper channels. I told Banerji that I thought it shameful the way some of the French officers in Syria went parading around in trick uniforms, drinking great quantities of native liquor, and sleeping with female camp-followers, while their own country was enduring such suffering and humiliation. Banerji had had plenty of trouble with the French himself, but instead of damning them he went to great lengths to explain to me that one should feel nothing but sympathy and understanding for men whom we were inclined to condemn because we were unable to put ourselves in their places. Another time I drew some unfavorable comparisons between the desert Arabs, who seemed like a clean, self-respecting lot, and the town Arabs, who seemed like a lot of degenerate beggars. Banerji wouldn't even listen to such talk.

What with Banerji, the castle, the efficiency game, and the good company of my friends, it didn't seem long before the day came in the latter part of April

when we were relieved by new men fresh from the U.S.A.\* and were brought back to Egypt and the R.A.S.C. (Mobilization Center) to organize for new assignments with the famous Eighth Army.

While we were on the troopship the news from North Africa had been so good that we had been generally worried for fear the fighting would be over before we should have a chance to take up our work. However, by the time we arrived in Syria, Rommel had driven the Eighth Army out of Benghazi and back to within thirty miles of Tobruk. While we were in Syria, there were frequent rumors of an impending attack, which made us anxious to get to the desert in a hurry.

By the time our two "veteran" platoons got down to the mobilization center in Egypt, the Field Service had rid itself of most of the smart boys who had been giving us trouble, and we were all set to go, our morale greatly lifted by the fact that at last we were going into action. We spent a couple of weeks getting additional training from Royal Army Service Corps instructors and drawing brand new ambulances and summer equipment. On the fifteenth of May we started westward on the long journey to Tobruk. This time my section was made up of Bob Sullivan, Jim McGill, Ed Pattulo, Bill Nichols, Peter Glenn, and Jim Crudgington (my old Princeton class-

\* The new men were placed under officers promoted from our original unit, one of these being Tom DePew, who had been in charge of a section at Damascus. Tom and I had been hoping to work together eventually, but now he was obliged to stay in Syria.

mate who had introduced me to the A.F.S.: he had become an authority on British Army traditions and was then known as "The General"). I had special reason to rejoice in that all these boys were personal friends of mine.

The trip to Tobruk was quite an adventure. There were no Germans dropping down from the sky to impede our progress, but once we got west of Sidi Barrani—the point farthest east which the Axis forces had threatened—there was plenty of the atmosphere of war. Derelict vehicles, planes, and guns were scattered along the coast road, and as we passed by towns bearing such famous names as Solum, Capuzzo, and Bardia, we were able to look for ourselves and get a pretty good idea of the fierceness of the battles that had transformed these places into such awful shambles.

The coast road passes between the Mediterranean on the north and the desert on the south. It is (or was) the main artery of supply for the desert forces. The soldiers of the Eighth Army call the desert the "Blue." You can see what they mean when you drive westward on the coast road. It seems to wind on endlessly; it extends to the horizon and beyond the horizon. It literally passes into the blue.

## *Chapter IV*

### DEFEAT

The men who fought and held Tobruk in the bitter days of 1941 have given the name of the town a dignity which has not been and can not be dimmed by any succession of later events. Regardless of catastrophe or success the word Tobruk will always hold a special meaning and a special glamour.

At the time our Ambulance Company first entered the perimeter of that famous town, the Axis forces were a good fifteen or twenty miles to the west, and there was very little fighting in progress. Nevertheless, the magic of the name was so great that as we crossed the tank ditch which marked the eastern boundary of Tobruk I kept thinking to myself: "My God, here I am in Tobruk," and I wanted to reach across thousands of miles and tell my family and friends: "I'm in Tobruk!"

We arrived in the afternoon at our assigned camp area outside the town. It was nothing but an open sandy plain dotted with lumps of camel grass, with here and there a pile of abandoned Italian shells and grenades. There were a number of Italian dugouts near our dispersal area, but as those were still occupied by members of the British unit we were reliev-

ing, we made preparations to sleep in our ambulances temporarily, and a number of us went into town to look things over. At that time there was still enough of the town left so that you could tell it had once been a very pretty little place—I should say about four hundred modern white houses, a fine-looking school, a town hall, and a handsome Catholic church built on the top and side of a hill overlooking the hull-ridden harbor. A good many of the buildings still had shape and form—though of course they were badly scarred, and very few of them boasted a decent roof. Some of the houses were occupied by British soldiers, who had painted nostalgic or humorous names on the outside—"Mayfair Lodge," "Piccadilly Inn," etc. The streets were well built and still serviceable, and there was a pretty plaza in front of the church, flanked by what had once been nice little shops. Incidentally, the church had been thoroughly battered and wasn't safe to enter, but there was a beautiful stone figure of the Virgin still standing to one side—quite unharmed.

We returned to our dispersal area to go through the familiar routine of standing in line for bully beef, tea, and biscuits and were met with information from a "usually reliable" source that within a few days Rommel was expected to put on a large scale attack. It was further stated that this was just what the British command wanted and that before very long we might expect to move farther westward behind a victorious Eighth Army.

We spent a quiet night sleeping in our ambulances,

and in the morning word was passed around that our duties would involve clearing the patients out of the Tobruk hospital back to a mobile military hospital near Capuzzo—a distance of some ninety miles along the coast road.

We hadn't been in Tobruk more than a few days when everything started to happen at once. Air activity over the town increased, Rommel attacked, and our work began in earnest. It was all brand new to us. For the first time we were carrying battle casualties; for the first time we saw enemy planes, and for the first time we discovered that there was a war going on which was part of our own everyday lives. During our first two days, while we were sitting around waiting for our work to begin, we had seen a couple of British bombers shot down in the distance, and we had heard a slight amount of anti-aircraft fire at night. However, I had become so used to sitting around doing nothing day after day in Syria that, when we first got to Tobruk and started to do some more sitting, it all seemed quite familiar in spite of the added glamour. Pretty soon things were different.

Our first hint of something new came on the third night in camp. Most of us had disregarded orders to dig slit trenches and were peacefully sleeping in our ambulances when suddenly the sky was lit up with searchlights, and a terrific barrage of anti-aircraft went up. Now there's nothing very dangerous or exciting about an ack-ack barrage, especially when you're in an area which is not likely to be a target,

but that Tobruk barrage was one hell of a noisy and colorful affair, and we'd never seen anything like it before. Though I say it with considerable shame now, I must admit that I was convinced at the time that the air was already full of big fat bombs heading directly for me. Bill Nichols and I jumped out of the ambulance we were sleeping in and threw ourselves into what had once been the beginning of a slit trench but which now seemed the most exposed piece of territory for miles around.

"Wish we'd dug ourselves some slit trenches," said I.

"Yeah," said Bill.

Just then an anti-aircraft fragment landed a few feet away.

"Sully's got a nice big ditch over by his car. Room for all of us."

With one accord we clutched at our tin hats and ran for the shelter of that ditch. By the time we'd arrived at Sullivan's ambulance things had quieted considerably. Bill and I were already beginning to feel silly, when, to make matters worse, Sully and Ed Pattulo stuck sleepy heads out of the back of the car and said: "What's the trouble?" "What's going on?"

"Lots of ack-ack fragments dropping around. Thought perhaps we ought to take cover."

"Ah, they won't hit you," scoffed the big Irishman.

By this time everything was quiet again. Bill and I stood there looking sheepish for a while, and then, muttering something about "Well, they might," we

crept back to our own car and climbed on to our stretchers. No sooner did we settle down to sleep than the banging started all over again. Again my imagination started to run away with me, but this time I was more afraid of looking foolish than anything else. I guess Bill felt the same way, so we both stuck it out for the night and managed to get a fairly decent rest. In the morning we found to our great joy that we had done such a good job of alarming Sullivan and Pattulo that they had crawled out of their stretchers and spent a miserable night in the cold, cold ground.

Practically every night from this time until the time we left Tobruk there was a display of fireworks overhead, and we could hear the occasional crump of bombs in the distance. Sometimes the Germans would drop parachute flares directly overhead, and a few of these landed in among our vehicles. Flares were always quite exciting because all the machine-gunners in the area would concentrate their fire in an effort to knock them down quickly. Also, it took me some time to get over the idea that if flares were dropped over an area it meant that the area would be bombed out of existence. At odd intervals we were warned that the Germans were about to fill the sky with real live parachutists, and we were given all sorts of instructions on the proper way to behave in case of attack—I think we were supposed to immobilize our vehicles or blow horns or some such business—and I remember speculating on the possibility of accidentally sleeping through it all, in some in-



conspicuous hole in the ground. But nothing came of it.

When the English Ambulance Company moved out I found myself a dugout to sleep in and managed to get some very good nights' rest, free from worry about getting hit on the head. There were a lot of Anglo-Italian fleas and crab lice in that dugout, but they weren't such bad company under the circumstances.

It was essential to get a good night's sleep in those days, since the long drives to and from Capuzzo proved to be very tiring both mentally and physically. We certainly weren't overworked in any sense, and we were in no particular danger, but I'll never forget how I dreaded the early mornings when I'd take one of my section ambulances into the hospital to be loaded up with wounded. I never got used to that trip, and each day seemed just as bad as the first.

The hospital was on the western side of the town, fortunately on the opposite side from the harbor, or it wouldn't have lasted as long as it did. It was built in the shape of a hollow rectangle, with a courtyard in the middle, and the various wards opened on to the courtyard. We'd drive into the courtyard and wait for the call to back up to a particular ward, praying while we waited that we might be loaded with walking wounded and not stretcher cases. We were almost sure to get stretcher cases nine times out of ten, so praying did very little good. After we were motioned to a certain ward, it was the duty

of the driver to open up the back of his ambulance and help load the patients. As each patient was loaded I used to wonder just how badly he was hit and how he'd stand the long hard ride that lay ahead.

Once away from the hospital and out on the coast road, one of the patients would invariably open a conversation by asking how long it would take to get to the next hospital. If it was an officer asking the question it would start out: "Driver, how long—" Otherwise it would be: "Say, Yank, how long—" In any case, having been informed that the trip would be a matter of four-and-a-half hours, a general groan would go up. Then some one would ask how you, an American, happened to be in Tobruk, and were you a part of the American Army? When that matter was straightened out I always picked on the most congenial-looking patient and asked how the battle was going and how he got hurt. The answer to the first part of the question was usually optimistic—over-optimistic. Having finished these routine preliminaries, the occupants of the ambulance would settle down to think their own thoughts. The next four-and-a-half hours were always miserable for every one concerned.

The Eighth Army was throwing everything it had into the battle, and consequently there was so much traffic on the coast road that it was impossible to maintain any sort of ambulance convoy. Each ambulance had to make its way individually against and around a steady stream of tank carriers, armored cars, and trucks of every description. At best, the

road would have been tough going for an ambulance load of wounded men. It had once been a very good road, but now it was pock-marked and jagged-edged, and there were miles at a stretch where the macadam gave way to a washboard surface of rough stone. With the extra burden of traffic, the surface was daily deteriorating, and the macadam had become so narrow that whenever a vehicle of any size approached, it was inevitable that our ambulances should be forced to bump along with two wheels on the precarious shoulder and two wheels on the torn edges.

The patients were brave men and did their best not to complain, but one could hardly expect them to retain much composure throughout the long ride in a bouncing hot box filled with fumes, dust, and the smell of dressings. I remember vividly the nervous tension and the awful feeling in the pit of my own stomach whenever it was necessary to drive a carload of stretcher cases off the edge of the road or across a stony stretch. I knew how awful it must be for the patients, and I knew that they were bound to cry out as an automatic physical reaction. It was particularly hard at first because I wasn't at all "hardened" to the job, and I always felt that it was my fault for not driving more carefully. Still, there was nothing to do about it, because they had to get to the hospital, and it wouldn't do any good to stop and prolong the agony. I remember that back home I had seen a book with the catchy title *The Wounded Don't Cry*, and for some strange reason that phrase

used to pass through my mind over and over again. I had never read the book, but I built up an unreasoning hatred for the title. It used to prey on my mind so that I'd find myself thinking: "Of course the wounded cry. Why in hell shouldn't they cry?"

For about three weeks my section was working almost daily on the Tobruk-Capuzzo run. Since I had no car assigned to me, we worked out a system toward the end whereby I would take over one of the cars five days out of six, instead of just riding as a passenger in the lead car, and in that manner we each got some time to stay in camp, do some washing, and get a swim in the Mediterranean. In order to get to the beach, it was necessary to endure a long and bumpy truck ride across a rocky piece of desert, but it was certainly worth while. We did our swimming in a sandy cove where the water was invariably warm and pleasant. It was almost possible to forget there was a war on as we splashed around in the blue water or sun-bathed on the white sandy beach. (Months after we left Tobruk I saw a ferocious little article in an American paper to the effect that we'd had to go through dangerous minefields to get to the beach and that we'd been machine-gunned from the air while swimming. All I know is that the minefields were well charted, and no enemy planes ever took the trouble to shoot at me while I was swimming.)

Generally speaking, there were no real hardships attached to our camp life at Tobruk. The water was quite salty, and we weren't allowed more than a pint

a day for drinking, shaving, and washing, but we usually managed to wash our clothes and ourselves in the sea, and it's quite possible to drink, shave, and spruce up on what we were allowed, especially since we were given plenty of tea, which wasn't included in the water ration. Our food was the best we'd had in a long time. Once we got settled down, our R.A.S.C. cooks managed to turn out some A-1 meals. Bully beef isn't bad when cooked, and at times we even got pastry and a ration of vegetables.

We organized a "twilight league" soccer team and actually managed to win a freak victory from a neighboring South African anti-tank company. Most of our evenings' activities centered around a large dugout which had been turned into a canteen. Here one could buy tinned fruit, chocolate, a small amount of hard liquor, and a tin of beer each week. There was a radio in the canteen, which, up to the time my section was ordered away, gave out nightly news of the great victory being won in the west. We believed the damn thing, too—although we sometimes wondered why the sound of gunfire was getting closer instead of farther away.

One of the nicest things about our stay in Tobruk (though we didn't appreciate it at the time) was the fact that we were so very safe. While my section was with the main body there ~~was~~ really only one occasion when the "fortunes of war" threatened us. One evening after our meal, a flight of Stukas (some say twenty-four, some say six) peeled off and headed for our area. I was walking toward platoon head-

quarters at the time, with Lieutenant Chan Ives and some of the N.C.O.'s when we saw the bombers coming directly toward us. No sooner had I noticed them than I also noticed that they were releasing bombs and were in an ideal position to do some strafing. Chan's dugout was only a few steps away, and I moved toward it with a speed of motion which would have astounded those who know me well. I landed on the floor of the dugout just about the same instant that the bombs began to land a few hundred yards away.

It was my first experience with this sort of thing, even at such a distance, and, needless to say, I was certain that this amounted to a special attempt on my life. Of course it had never occurred to me that the Germans would go out of their way to harm me personally, or any other member of the American Field Service for that matter. It was amazing to think (even erroneously) that they were actually trying to destroy *us*. The "raid" had hardly begun before it was over. Apparently the German pilots had seen the mass of red crosses painted on the tops of our ambulances and had given the project up as a bad job. The few bombs that were dropped landed among our workshop trucks, wounding one man and inflicting slight damage on the vehicles. Altogether we got off very easily.

The incident gave us something to talk about for days, and it provided us with a strangely pleasant feeling that now we'd been "under fire." However, there were some unfortunate aftermaths. One of our

English cooks, who had had some terrible experiences in the earlier days of the war, had to be shipped off to a rest camp with a case of nerves, and one of our own drivers convinced himself that this was not only an attempt to destroy him personally but also an unprincipled attack on the Red Cross.

Our American Field Service company was kept pretty much intact during our stay in Tobruk, with the exception of two sections—one serving with an Indian Field Ambulance in the El Adem area (south of Tobruk) and one attached to the general hospital as hardworking handymen. After we had been on the Tobruk-Capuzzo run for about three weeks, my section was picked to relieve the boys at El Adem. They had been having a particularly rough time because—in spite of the radio optimism—the Germans had managed to break through on the south and make the El Adem area exceedingly uncomfortable.

We were all as pleased as Punch at having been chosen for this detached service, because we didn't enjoy the long haul between Tobruk and Capuzzo, and we were naïvely looking forward to "seeing some action." Some of the anticipation was taken out of it for me because, as fate would have it, my older brother, Bill, who had joined the Field Service some months after I did, put in an appearance at Tobruk just before I left for the field ambulance job. We tried to fix things so that we could work together in the same section, but we had bad luck. It wasn't until August that Bill finally got into my section, and

then he was suffering from a skin infection and was shortly invalidated home.

Four of the cars in our section needed some attention from the workshops before undertaking the new assignment, so Bob Sullivan and I took the one serviceable machine and went ahead of the others to report to the Assistant Director of Medical Services (boss medical officer of the Indian division) at division headquarters outside El Adem. We were greatly discouraged to find that the fighting had petered out and that there was some question as to whether our five additional ambulances would be needed at all. Sully and I spent a day sitting around on a convenient hump of camel grass while the great men wondered what to do with us, and on the following day Lieutenant Andy Geer arrived with the other four cars and held a council of war with the Colonel Sahib. Apparently Andy persuaded him that we were essential in one way or another, and he returned to us with news that four cars were to be assigned to a field ambulance and one car was to serve at the regimental aid post of an armored car unit. We drew lots to see who would get the R.A.P. job, and Peter Glenn won.

During the famous siege of Tobruk the Germans had built a rough stem road which served as a detour around the town. This road is known as the "Axis Road." It branches off from the coast road about twelve miles west of Tobruk, passes through El Adem to the south, and rejoins the coast road fifteen miles to the east of Tobruk. The Indian divisional



H.Q. and the main dressing-station of the Field Ambulance we were attached to were located on the Axis Road a few miles southwest of the eastern junction with the coast road—that is, about fifteen miles east northeast of the El Adem defenses.

Andy and I decided to escort Peter to his armored car unit at El Adem, so that we could see the sights and I could get some idea of the area my section might have to operate in.

At that time a majority of the fighting troops of the Indian division\* were concentrated in and around the El Adem “box,” and Peter’s armored car unit was hidden away in a wadi, just outside the main area. We had a terrible time finding it but enjoyed the opportunity to do some sight-seeing. El Adem itself is nothing but a small cluster of mud-colored huts, but the “box” proved to be fascinating. Actually, the engineers had built a modern type of fort. About two square miles of uneven desert had been “walled” in with barbed wire and mines: the “garrison” sat inside waiting to sally forth or hold their ground as the occasion should demand.

While we were wandering around the box, we were engaged in conversation by a friendly British Brigadier. We asked him how the fight was going. He smiled and said: “Though I say so myself, it’s going pretty well”; then he added thoughtfully, “So far.” The Brigadier looked like a very capable sort

\* The men of an Indian division are not all Indians. There are a certain number of white English battalions, and all the King’s commissioned officers are white.

to me, and I was full of confidence that he and his box could come to no harm. It all looked quite formidable to my untrained eye.

Andy and I were naïvely disappointed not to find the Germans close at hand and made up our minds that as soon as we should drop Peter off at his post we were going out to look for 'em. Just at lunchtime we stumbled across the headquarters of the unit we were looking for and were treated to a good meal in the "officers' mess"—a hole in the ground with a piece of canvas over the top. The officers thought Andy and I were American doctors and went out of their way to be hospitable. They even managed to dig up some cold American beer. Luckily, they also persuaded us not to go out looking for the Germans.

We left Peter beaming over the prospect of a pleasant life with good company and headed back for the Field Ambulance headquarters. Andy dumped me off at the little cluster of tents and ambulances which marked the main dressing-station of the 21st Indian Field Ambulance and drove his little truck back to the camp at Tobruk. The boys of my section immediately crowded around and wanted to know how long we were going to be stuck "back here." "Why couldn't we be attached to the advance dressing-station?" I promised them I would report to the colonel in charge of the Field Ambulance and see what could be done. The colonel turned out to be a regular Indian Army medical officer and a very hard man to talk to. He was more worried about our position in the military social hierarchy and whether

we should eat with the Indian orderlies or the two white N.C.O.'s than anything else. He didn't seem to know just what to do with us, and the best I could get out of him was that he'd "think about" sending us to the advance dressing-station. In the meantime we were to disperse our cars, dig holes, and eat with the white N.C.O.'s.

There followed four days of complete boredom. The two white sergeants were nice enough little fellows, and the Indian orderlies waited on us hand and foot, but we were all excited about playing fire-eater and didn't have the sense to realize how lucky we were. I used to report to one of the medical officers each morning to tell him we were ready to go out and win the war. He didn't seem a bit impressed. "Really, old chap," he'd say, "there just aren't any casualties." Then he'd send a couple of ambulances way back to Capuzzo with some dysentery cases, and that would make us even unhappier. One day Peter Glenn came in from his R.A.P. with some more dysentery cases. He hadn't seen any fighting, but he announced that the French had evacuated Bir Hacheim and the Indian division was about to rush out and recapture the place. There was some momentary excitement over that, but it sounded like a rumor. How could the French possibly lose Bir Hacheim?

On our fourth day of sitting around the M.D.S. the general atmosphere began to change. Air activity over the near-by railhead and supply dumps became considerably heavier; there was some strafing done on a near-by unit, and there were persistent rumors

that the battle had taken a turn for the worse. That evening the colonel invited us Americans into his mess tent for drinks. At first the tea party looked as though it might turn out to be a miserable frost; we didn't know what to make of the English medical officers, and they didn't know what to make of us. However, there was a good stock of liquor, and it didn't take any of us too long to drink away our respective inhibitions. The colonel turned out to be quite a talker under the proper stimulus. After about a half-hour of small talk I turned to him and asked how the battle was going. To my complete surprise he answered: "It's a muck-up. A complete unmilitary muck-up. As a matter of fact, we may be cut off right now."

As if to emphasize his remarks, the Germans picked that moment to start dropping a few bombs in the neighborhood. The bombs weren't very close, but the colonel glanced under the table and I did the same.

"Don't be shy about getting under the table if they get any closer," said he. "I'll be right with you."

I laughed unconvincingly. Up to this point it really hadn't occurred to me that there was much chance of our team getting licked. I'd given up expecting to roll on to Tripoli in the immediate future, but—Suddenly I thought of Peter Glenn. I asked the colonel how long Peter was supposed to stay with the armored cars.

"Get him back here right away," said the colonel.

"We may have to move. May have to go anywhere. I'll need all the ambulances I can get."

Peter hadn't come into the main dressing-station that day, and it occurred to me that he might have gone straight to Tobruk. I excused myself momentarily and walked over to a near-by signal tent. I got hold of the Field Service H.Q. on the telephone and asked if they'd seen Peter. Yes, Peter had come in during the day and had returned to El Adem. He couldn't get to us by the Axis Road and had taken a short cut direct to Tobruk. He was expected to return to Tobruk soon. I figured that there was no sense in Peter's breaking his neck to get to us when he already had a job on his hands, so I just let the headquarters sergeant know that we might be moving off soon and let it go at that. (Peter never did return to the A.F.S. headquarters as expected. He's been sitting in an Italian prison camp for a year now.)

I returned to the temporary comforts of the colonel's liquor supply to find that he had called in his two sergeants and was discussing the probability of a mass exodus of the Indian orderlies during the night. It seems that Indian medical orderlies are not exactly the same breed of men as the fighting Indians, and the colonel had had an unfortunate previous experience in which all his Indian boys had run off and left him holding the bag. "Damn unreliable chaps when they get the wind up," said the colonel. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep an eye on things to-night. Blighters might all run off and leave us, you know."

It was arranged then and there that the two English sergeants and the boys in my section were to stand guard through the night. I was very excited at the prospect of thus bearing the white man's burden. It all seemed very adventurous. The only catch in the scheme was that, by the time the party broke up, we had all put away such a considerable quantity of liquor that we were quite ready to enjoy a full night's sleep. The Indians didn't run away that night, but it wasn't our fault.

The next day we started a little retreat all our own. I couldn't figure out just what was happening, since the general retreat hadn't started yet, but I consoled myself and the boys by trying to give credence to the rumor that we were really just moving on to a better evacuation line. We traveled east along the coast road until we came to Capuzzo and then south into the desert along the wire that marks the Libyan-Egyptian border. We kept on going about twenty-five miles down the wire until we came to a spot known as Libyan Shefersen (distinguished by nothing). To our great joy we then traveled northeast on a sandy track leading towards El Adem. Fortunately, we traveled only about ten miles along this track and then stopped.

This left us a good fifty miles away from El Adem, but we still had large ideas about dashing across the desert to pick up casualties. This was the first time that we'd really been out of sight of any sort of civilization, and I found it quite exciting for the first fifteen or twenty minutes. I viewed the rolling

stretches of sand and rock with considerable interest and dusted off my compass, with the idea that it might be a real help to me out here.

We sat around that God-forsaken piece of desert for the next two days, and my compass was no help to me at all. We just sat there. Every few hours I'd go up to one of the officers and ask when we were going to move farther west. I might as well have saved my breath. For one thing, no one knew when we were going to move or where, and for another thing most of them had seen enough war so that they weren't particularly interested in moving anywhere.

On the third day we started getting a lot of news. We woke up in the morning to find that the once empty desert was dotted with hundreds of trucks streaking toward the wire—for all the world like a Cecil B. DeMille extravaganza. Word came through that the Eighth Army had lost 120 tanks in one day and that the Army was in full retreat. Once again our Field Ambulance was ordered to the east—this time way back into Egypt. Upon hearing this last I talked to the boys in my section, and we made up our mind that we'd already retreated far enough. We were naïvely believing that the rest of the Field Service was still in Tobruk having a wonderful time. After thinking it over for a while I got up my courage and told the colonel that I'd like to take my cars back to Tobruk. The colonel obviously thought that I was out of my head, but he finally allowed that it was all right with him, provided we traveled

by way of the coast road and made inquiries of the Military Police along the way. That same evening the colonel and his men said good-by to us and headed for Egypt, and we got our four cars ready for the long drive back to Tobruk.

In the morning we drove east to the border wire and followed it north toward Capuzzo and the coast road. We noticed that a number of new gaps had been opened in the wire to make way for the steady stream of motor transport moving from west to east, and when we got to Capuzzo we saw that the coast road itself was jammed with traffic moving in the wrong direction. At first I was discouraged by appearances and thought of joining in the general retreat, but since no one seemed interested in stopping us from driving westward, I decided to go through with our plans. I figured that in any case they could always use extra ambulances at Tobruk. By the time we had driven some twenty-five miles on our way and left Capuzzo and Bardia behind us, the retreating traffic had thinned considerably, and it wasn't long before we had the road all to ourselves. I had always wanted to drive along that road without being bothered by the usual mass of transport, but now I felt quite nervous and lonely. Of course I didn't have the sense to worry about getting into real trouble: I was mainly worried about looking silly.

As we neared the perimeter of Tobruk, we noticed a few scattered shell bursts to the south of the road,



but they were so well off the road that they caused us no great concern.

At about noon we came to the tank ditch on the eastern side of town and stopped to talk to a lonely looking British officer who was perched on top of a chunk of concrete manipulating a pair of field glasses. He seemed rather surprised to see us—not too surprised, just politely so. We asked him how things were going, and he replied that he really didn't know himself. He was observing a group of armor that was maneuvering around to the south.

We drove on into the town, and I was surprised and relieved to see that everything looked completely normal. The usual quantity of trucks were dispersed on the patches of desert bordering the road; the supply dumps were all intact; the ordnance, service, and engineering corps were still in evidence, and the usual number of soldiers seemed to be going about their routine tasks.

It wasn't until we drove into the hospital yard that I noticed any change in the Tobruk we had left a few days earlier. We had been accustomed to a great deal of bustle and activity around the hospital, but now the place had an entirely new atmosphere. It was as if a busy little town had suddenly closed down all the shops, stopped all traffic, and come out into the street to think things over. Nobody seemed to be doing anything—even the few English ambulances scattered around the yard looked as though they were never going to move again. I

walked up to a corporal and asked him if the American Field Service had left town.

"Ah," said he, "left three days ago; left with the nurses—cleared the hospital."

"Aren't there any patients left?"

"No—no patients."

I suddenly felt very let down. No patients, no Field Service, no noise, no motion. I'd been pretty well keyed up to expect big things, and this was anticlimactic. Feeling like a very small boy, I walked to the Administration Building and presented myself to the colonel commanding the hospital. He looked up at me impatiently.

"What is it?" he snapped.

I stammered out a confused story about how we'd been relieved of duty with the 21st Indian Field Ambulance and were looking for the American Field Service.

"Don't know what you're talking about," said he. "What are you doing here? How'd you get here?"

"Drove in from the east, sir."

"From the east? I thought we were cut off. Well you'd better get out the way you came in."

"Don't you need ambulances—can't we stay here?" I pleaded.

"Oh, no. We've got plenty of ambulances. Can't even use what we've got—no place for them to go." He looked thoughtful for a minute, then said: "Now you listen to me. I've got an extra surgical team here that's got to get to Solum. They missed the last hospital ship. Think you can take them?"

"Sure. We've got four cars."

"All right, then. Get some lunch, load up, and get under way. I don't know whether you'll get out or not, but then, if you got in so easily, I suppose you might get out."

I returned to the boys with the news. We were all very disappointed that we weren't going to stay, since we had set our hearts on being the heroes of the latest siege of Tobruk.

We lined up in the mess hall for a meager lunch consisting of one boiled egg, two pieces of bread, and a dash of jam. While we were bolting our "meal" the colonel came in to address the hospital personnel. The gist of his remarks was that Tobruk would be held at all costs, that it was well garrisoned with "between twenty and seventy thousand men," and that they weren't completely cut off even now, since four American ambulances had just come in from the east.

After lunch we loaded our surgical team—three N.C.O.'s, three doctors, and a pile of equipment—and rolled quietly out of town. If we expected a lot of blood and thunder we were disappointed. The enemy must have observed us from the escarpment which runs a few miles south of the road, but they let us go our way in peace.

By evening we had arrived at Solum across the Egyptian border, and in the morning we dropped our surgical friends off at a near-by hospital. We stopped in at the rear army headquarters to find out what had happened to the main body of the

Field Service and were informed that it was resting on a beach near Sidi Barrani. We drove through normal traffic the rest of the day (the retreat had momentarily stopped at Solum) and in the late afternoon arrived at Field Service H.Q.

The Field Service had certainly picked a beautiful spot to enjoy the pause in the retreat. The cars were all dispersed along the edge of a white, sandy beach, and the area actually boasted a grove of palm trees and a stretch of green grass bordering the inland side of the dunes. The place was such a paradise that I got the feeling that I was a sort of hero coming back from the wars to a garden of peace. (By this time I had pretty well convinced myself that our uneventful dash in and out of Tobruk was a rather sensational exploit.) It was a little distressing not to be able to tell a thrilling story of our adventures, but we did our best to convey the impression that we really didn't want to talk about all we'd been through "out there."

We had expected to find Peter Glenn safe and sound with the rest of the Field Service but were disappointed to find that no one had any idea of his whereabouts, though it was believed that his unit had escaped from El Adem safely, and he was expected to show up any minute. There was some very bad news about the six Field Service men who had been with the French in the evacuation from Bir Hacheim. One had been definitely killed, three were missing, and two wounded.

The next three days were spent swimming and

sun-bathing. On the second day we heard that Tobruk had fallen. We had always maintained a certain amount of confidence that the enemy would be stopped sometime soon in the natural course of events, but now our confidence was gone. We weren't surprised when the order came on the third day to start moving east again.

We retreated by stages to Mersa Matruh and El Daba, making occasional side trips into the desert to clear out dressing-stations. By this time the retreat was really a demoralizing spectacle. Not that every one didn't behave properly, but just that there was such an awful jam of traffic, trying so desperately to untangle itself and move eastward. Nobody seemed to know or care just where the army was retreating to or what it would do when it got there. The only thing that any one seemed sure of was that it was vitally necessary to keep moving.

Every man in that retreat owes a vote of thanks to the RAF. Somehow they managed to keep the enemy planes from pounding the helpless mass of retreating transport.

## *Chapter V*

### MINQUAR QUAM

There is a lovely beach at El Daba, and it was made even lovelier by the fact that Rommel & Co. were a good eighty miles to the west. We had made a long and tiring routine evacuation run that day and were looking forward to a few days of lazing around in the sun with nothing to do but eat, sleep, and swim. As a matter of fact, we were anticipating the good life by downing a considerable quantity of beer. War can be very pleasant at times.

Just as I was beginning to appreciate that fact, a despatch rider appeared with orders for me to report to Lieutenant Geer at the headquarters tent. It seemed that the New Zealand Division had been rushed down from Syria to the desert and were, at that time, sitting at Mersa Matruh preparing for a delaying action. Furthermore, the New Zealanders required twenty additional ambulances in a hurry.

The upshot of the matter was that I found myself the next morning leading a convoy of twenty ambulances westward toward Mersa Matruh to join the New Zealand Division.

After considerable wanderings, I made contact with the D.A.D.M.S. of the division and was di-

rected to assign ten cars to the supply column as a reserve, five cars to the 4th Brigade Field Ambulance, and five cars to the 5th Brigade Field Ambulance. Just by chance I assigned myself and my own section (five cars) to the 5th Brigade, which I soon learned was to proceed south into the desert that night. (As I learned later, General Freyberg—the New Zealand Commander—had decided to move the bulk of his effective strength toward the south for the business on hand, since he considered Matruh something of a fire-trap.)

I had never served with New Zealanders before and consequently was not equipped with a proper appreciation of that finest of all fighting divisions. It's always a little frightening to join an entirely new unit, because you never know just what will be expected of you or what to expect of the unit. Any misgivings that I may have had about our new posting were completely abandoned from the moment I reported to the Field Ambulance transport officer, Lieutenant George Frazer. I have never, before or since that time, met a young officer who inspired such immediate confidence. Lieutenant Frazer must have known at the time that we had a hard job ahead, and he certainly had every right to be rushed and harried—instead of which, he was completely calm, explicit, and friendly. He took down the number of each ambulance, with the names of the drivers, saw to it that we were quickly supplied with five days' emergency rations: tea, bully beef, crackers, and cheese. He made sure that we were supplied

with a sufficiency of water and petrol and sent us off to a good hot meal with orders to assemble at eight o'clock for complete instruction as to convoy routine, schedule of departure, etc.

As we waited in line for our meal, we were given a very friendly reception by the rank-and-file members of the 5th Field Ambulance—medical orderlies, army service corps drivers, N.C.O.'s, and despatch riders. I was immediately impressed by the fact that although these men were not, strictly speaking, "fighting troops," still they were as fine looking a lot as one could ever hope to meet.

In view of the fact that the Eighth Army was at that time busily engaged in the business of retreating eastward toward the dubious protection of El Alamein, and that the New Zealand Division had been obliged to make their way to Matruh through the middle of an army going in the wrong direction, there was a remarkable spirit of confidence among the men. There was a rumor about that we were to move south at ten o'clock that night. I didn't like the idea much myself, because, although Mersa Matruh is nothing much more than a half-ruined Egyptian town with nothing to recommend it other than a nice harbor and maybe a couple of hundred sand and plaster houses, together with a mosque, a modernistic hotel, and an occasional tired-looking tree, still Matruh did represent an established fortified position, complete with many layers of mine-fields, barbed wire, and anti-tank ditches, and to



venture out of this position seemed a step into the great unknown.

The New Zealand soldiers, on the other hand, seemed well enough pleased by the prospect of a move anywhere. They had full confidence in their "Tiny" (General Freyberg) and were full of pride in the fact that their division had been chosen to do a big job.

Of course, there were extremes of speculation, and one corporal fastened himself on us new-comers and proceeded to give us "definite information" that the division was about to cut off, surround, and defeat the entire Axis force within five days. I was ready to believe just about anything, but I really couldn't see how a single incomplete division could effect much more than a short delaying action. Of course, I didn't have the slightest idea what a delaying action would be like. I think I had an idea that we were about to play a game of redskins and covered wagons.

Every one was anxious to give us help and advice and to tell us about the New Zealand Division. For the first time since arriving in the Middle East I felt that we were a part of something and not just attached as an extra trucking service. I certainly wanted to be a part of this crowd, and it was a tremendous vicarious thrill to listen to their casual references to Crete and Greece and the earlier desert campaigns. I must confess that I made *occasional* mention of the fact that we'd been at Tobruk and

perhaps of one or two other places where we might have been (but hadn't).

After supper we all scattered to our own particular vehicles and made preparations so that we should be ready to move at any time. Medical supplies were loaded on ambulances and three-ton trucks, and the extra personnel of the Field Ambulance unit was divided among our five Dodge ambulances and the four Austin ambulances which were a regular part of the company. The area in which we were dispersed—a bit of gravelly desert outside the town and just south of the sea and the coast road—had been bombed the night before, and we all kept an ear cocked to the air and one eye on a convenient slit trench while we worked on our cars.

Just after dark all the drivers, including ourselves, were assembled for a short talk by the transport officer.

We were to move at eleven o'clock, traveling east on the coast road for a few miles and then south into the desert. All vehicles were to move in "column of route" (single file) with fifty yards between cars. For short stops in the desert we were to move into leager position (a sort of stationary desert formation of five short columns instead of one long column). For long stops we were to disperse at 150 yards. Slit trenches were to be dug at any stop of over twenty minutes. No smoking would be allowed: should we be attacked from the air or from land, we were to keep on moving (some one muttered "suicide"). It was expected that we should be in

contact with the enemy within twenty hours. Lieutenant Frazer then gave specific instructions as to where each vehicle should take up position, and our five cars were assigned to the end of the convoy, just in front of the workshops repair truck. The colonel was to lead the convoy in his station wagon. We would be traveling as part of the 5th Brigade.

The meeting broke up with a certain amount of chaffing about the order to continue in motion if attacked, and we all went to our trucks to sit and wait for the order to move.

It seemed as though the order would never come, and we had plenty of time for our individual reflections. I don't remember being very worried about the physical dangers which lay ahead. As a matter of fact I had never, to my knowledge, been really close to any sort of violent death, either my own or any one else's. I was mainly concerned with the responsibility of being in charge of those five ambulances. I knew I had good men in my section—Bill Nichols, Bob Sullivan, Manning Field (who had taken Peter Glenn's place), Jim Crudgington, Jim McGill—the very finest that the A.F.S. could boast, but this was a new kind of work to us, and we all wanted very much to be up to the standards of the New Zealanders—to win some measure of their respect. Against a background of excitement and the nervous tension of starting out in a new job with new people, my mind was filled with all sorts of little worries. Would we keep our convoy positions properly? Would Bob Sullivan want to travel faster

than the rest? Did we really have enough gas? Would the New Zealanders discover our lack of experience in digging slit trenches? There was plenty to worry about when I set my mind to it.

Finally the order came to start off on the coast road. I was riding with Bill Nichols in the first of our ambulances, and I soon found that it was a full-time job trying to keep track of the equipment truck in front of us. Ordinarily at night no convoy bothers too much about keeping any set distance between trucks, because it's usually necessary to keep right on the other fellow's tail in order not to lose the convoy, but to-night there was a fairly bright moon, which made it possible to see most of fifty yards, and furthermore, there was a distinct possibility of enemy air activity. Therefore we did our best to maintain strict convoy discipline. It was particularly hard going while we were still on the coast road, because the shadowy form of each vehicle ahead blended perfectly with the dark background of the road. Apart from the eye strain, there was now a certain mental strain attached to the immediate possibility of being bombed. It didn't seem to me that the enemy pilots could help picking out the darkness of the road, so perfectly outlined on either side by the whiteness of the moon-drenched desert.

Occasionally we'd hear the quick, spasmodic banging of the ack-ack guns and see the lines of tracer streaming overhead. Ack-ack and tracer had become familiar sights at Tobruk, but how different it was now that there could be no flopping into slit

trenches! There actually wasn't much to worry about, yet I did get in some good practice at schooling myself to nonchalance of a sort.

After about an hour and a half of creeping eastward on the road, we came to the point where we were to turn south on to the desert. An M.P. with a red lantern pointed our way and we found ourselves on a wheel-rutted track marked with dim blue lights at various intervals. Beside each blue light stood a lone soldier, warmly bundled against the night air, presenting a dim and unmoving silhouette of watchfulness.

The atmosphere seemed less still and lonely in the desert. Now it was possible to see the shapes of many trucks and guns up ahead. An occasional motorcycle came sputtering past, and at times the stillness was broken by the noise of a racing motor, as some unfortunate driver sought to coax his vehicle through a soft spot. Now I had the feeling that we were part of a small army that was maneuvering for a special task. For the first time we were part of a direct blow, which was to be a complete factor in itself.

At about 3 A.M. our Field Ambulance unit leaguered at close interval, and the word was passed to dig in and get some sleep without bothering to disperse. The ground was very rocky, and when I had finally scratched out a shallow slit trench I was quite ready to drop off to sleep.

The next morning was uneventful; we dispersed our cars and passed the time getting to know our

new friends. At about three o'clock I was ordered to report to the sergeant-major, who informed me that "A" company was moving ahead with the brigade to establish an advance dressing-station and that two of my cars would be attached to "A" company along with the four New Zealand ambulances. The remaining three cars of my section were to stay with the main body of the Field Ambulance and establish a main dressing-station a few miles to the east. There was considerable wailing and gnashing of teeth as I drew lots to see who would drive the two "lucky" cars. It turned out that Manning Field and Jim McGill were to join the advance company, and I decided to join them as a spare driver—much to the dismay of Bill Nichols, who felt (rightly enough) that I was taking advantage of my position as N.C.O. to do as I pleased.

Our small convoy of five trucks and six ambulances was soon moving southward across the desert. We traveled across some eight miles of uninteresting rocky country until we came to a long escarpment running east and west and bounded on the northeast by a fairly flat elevation. At various intervals on the plain and on the slopes of the escarpment we could see the ever-present three-ton trucks scattered about and here and there the artillerymen unlimbering their 25-pounders. Three different times we dug our individual slit trenches and made ready to set up shop, only to find that we had settled on top of the 25-pounders. Finally, just before dusk, we found a suitable position and were wel-

came to it by a flight of low-flying German bombers, casually making their way off from a raid on one of the battalions, and seemingly oblivious to the welter of ack-ack bursts in the air. The planes inspired us to dig some good deep slit trenches for the night's rest.

Before we rolled into our trenches the entire company was assembled before the major. I've never lived through a more dramatic moment than that. The sun was just sinking at the western end of the plain; all around us the division was digging in for the night and making ready for the battle which lay ahead; off to the north a great mass of black smoke was rising toward the dull-pink sky; one couldn't hear a sound as we lined up before the major.

He began to speak in a quiet voice: "I've called you together to give you some idea of what our situation is. The division will fight a delaying action. We can expect to have the Germans in among us by morning." Without the slightest trace of excitement he nodded towards the north. "That smoke there—that's from Matruh."

"Then the Germans have taken Matruh, sir?" asked a soldier behind me.

There was the slightest suggestion of a bitter smile on the major's face as he answered: "No—we've evacuated."

The major dismissed us, and we went off to put the finishing touches on our slit trenches. Every one was suddenly extraordinarily polite and helpful—ex-

cept to one poor fellow who let slip some remark about, "This is a hell of a situation." I guess we'd more or less figured that out for ourselves.

The night passed quite uneventfully except for the fact that some of the ambulances were sent out to a battalion which had suffered heavy casualties in a bombing raid, having been caught on hard ground before they'd had time to dig in.

In the morning there were more bombing casualties, and our two cars were kept busy bringing patients in from the battalions. I spent some of my time driving Manning Field's car and some of it carrying stretchers around the A.D.S.—which consisted of nothing but two tents and a few scattered trucks. About mid-morning there was good evidence that the Germans had definitely arrived. Shells started dropping in the area to the west of us, and the New Zealand guns began putting up a continuous counter-fire. At first I thought it was all rather interesting and was foolish enough to remark to Manning that shell-fire didn't bother me particularly. Little did I know. For one thing, no shell had landed closer than two hundred yards from me, and for another thing I hadn't as yet observed at first hand what a shell fragment could do to a man.

At about eleven o'clock I took Manning's car out to one of the battalions. Just as I was some hundred yards from the first-aid post of the battalion, a tire blew out. By this time I had acquired a rather more healthy respect for shell-fire, and I was very unhappy to find that the tire had breathed its last



in a very unhealthy area. I walked over to the battalion medical officer's truck and found that there were four badly wounded men waiting to be transported back to the A.D.S. Obviously, it was up to me to change the tire in a hurry. I persuaded the orderly who was traveling with me to go and sit in a convenient hole in the ground, so that he might not notice my nervousness (and so that I might not notice his) and then started to work. Under normal circumstances I could have changed a tire faster with both hands tied behind my back. Every time a shell landed within hearing distance I died one of the proverbial thousand deaths. Finally, as I was nearing the one thousand mark, I got the job done and, having picked up the patients, headed for the comparative safety of the A.D.S. As I neared the A.D.S. what should I see but Manning, trudging out to look for me. He claimed that he was worried for fear I'd come to grief, but personally I attribute his restlessness to a conviction that I had run off (in the wrong direction) with his beloved car.

The A.D.S. was rapidly becoming flooded with wounded. Apparently, we were the only medical unit in the entire area and were therefore handling casualties from at least twice as many battalions and artillery regiments as we normally would. We had had no chance of evacuating back to the main dressing-station, since all available cars were needed to bring men into the A.D.S., where they could at least get some sort of reasonable medical attention. It was heart-breaking to see the wounded lying in long

rows in the sun waiting their turn to be attended by the major or one of his two assistant doctors. Even when they had been looked after, they had to lie there and wait for their chance to be transported back to the M.D.S. I don't suppose it was any help to them to watch their mates being laid away in the rapidly growing graveyard which the busy chaplain had established near-by. To make matters worse, the shelling was growing heavier, and the bursts were progressively nearer as our own 25-pounders were forced in closer to our small dressing-station.

There was nothing barbaric about the way the battle was being fought, and I am quite sure that the Germans were ~~not~~ particularly interested in shelling a Red Cross area. It simply happened that a German armored force was in a hurry to get to the east and that the New Zealand 25-pounders were doing a very effective job of checking its progress; therefore, the main German fire was being directed against the artillery, and the artillery was being squeezed in close to us as the area became more compact. At the time it was primarily a battle of German tanks and mobile artillery against the New Zealand gunners, and there was very little that the infantry could do to help.

Just before noon four of our American ambulances which had been held in reserve were brought up to the advance dressing-station by a New Zealand headquarters major, and it was decided to load up all the available ambulances with the exception of our two original cars and clear as many of the wounded as

possible back to the M.D.S. Our own major had already commandeered a small fleet of three-ton trucks for the "walking wounded," and soon a fair-sized convoy was organized and started out toward the east. The four new Field Service cars were commanded by Mort Belshaw and driven by John Peabody, Russ Hurd, Lawrence Sanders, and Bill Mitchell. I had meant to send Jim McGill back in this convoy, but he had been sent out to a battalion sometime earlier and had not returned. We afterward learned that Jim had been cut off from us and had been forced to make his way east toward Alamein.

We were all terribly relieved to see that convoy heading for comparative safety, but our relief was short-lived. Within about fifteen minutes the entire convoy had returned to the site of the A.D.S. with a report that we were now completely surrounded and that there was no possible route by which to evacuate the patients. As if to impress the news upon us, the enemy shellfire increased its tempo, and we found ourselves hugging the ground as a lone shell burst in our midst, perforating the upper cab of Manning Field's ambulance.

The medical officers held a conference and came to the conclusion that we were in as safe a place as could be found within that confined area, but that we should strike the tents and load up all the patients and equipment, so that we might be ready to make a dash if an opportunity should present itself.

The next twelve hours proved to be the worst I've ever had to live through.

There was nothing for us to do during the afternoon but sit and wait. Word was passed that any one who wanted to dig himself in as protection against the shell-bursts could do so, and a good many of the men managed to disappear into the earth in short order. I was just about to follow suit when I noticed that all the medical officers were calmly standing about completely without shelter, waiting to do what they could, and that most of the ambulance drivers were determined to sit in the seat of their cars and keep company with the seriously wounded who could not be unloaded. Of course we weren't in any terrible danger, as none of the shelling was being intentionally directed at our area, but it's very hard to resist the physical impulse to keep yourself as flat and low as possible when the shells are whistling and bursting near-by. I must admit that I took advantage of my position as an N.C.O. of sorts to walk around and visit at each car—a course of action which seemed infinitely preferable to just sitting there and taking it.

The afternoon was fairly uneventful, though there were some three incidents that stand out in my mind. As I was walking from one ambulance to another, a New Zealand soldier stuck his head out of a hole in the ground and called out: "Hey, Yank, how'd you like to be walking down Broadway now?" It didn't require much thought to reply that nothing would suit me better.

At another time I was asked to clear an ambulance to carry a doctor over to Division headquarters (General Freyberg had been wounded). To my amazement I found an empty ambulance, but no sooner had I queried the driver than I found that this ambulance was supposed to be full to overflowing with seriously wounded men who had somehow managed to drag themselves out of the car and seek the shelter of the ground.

The most terrifying moment occurred about mid-afternoon, as I was passing the time of day, with my head in the window of Manning's car. We were just remarking on the fact that things seemed quieter than usual, when suddenly, without any sound of firing or explosion, little clouds of sand were kicked up by the impact of some sort of projectile. A wounded officer who had been sitting on the ground near-by made a grab at his elbow and let out a scream. We soon learned that the trouble was caused by spent non-explosive German tank shells coming in from the east and that the unfortunate officer had collected one on the elbow. It certainly was an eerie business for a time.

The behavior of the medical officers, the wounded, and the drivers throughout the afternoon was inspiring. I'll never forget Manning Field, Bill Mitchell, John Peabody, and old man Sanders sitting in their cars, calmly chatting with the wounded and never even ducking their heads as the shells landed. Mort Belshaw, an ex-professional photographer, actually managed to take pictures of the bursts. As I have

said before, it's foolish to pretend that the wounded don't cry: for one thing there are certain types of stomach wounds which provide a continuous and excruciating pain, and, for another thing, any man who has been hit by shell-fire develops a consuming desire to get away from loud noises as quickly as possible. However, there are various degrees of crying, and all the wounded managed to accept the situation with a considerable degree of courage and fortitude. Moreover, they were extraordinarily considerate of each other and of the drivers who were doing their best to help them.

When darkness finally came, we fortified ourselves with some hot cocoa which the cooks had prepared, and I settled down in the front seat of Manning's ambulance for a quick nap. I did very little sleeping and smoked countless cigarettes, but somehow time wore on. At eleven o'clock the order to move immediately was given. It was believed that the infantry had managed to clear a gap through the Germans to the east, and we were quickly formed up with the main body of our brigade to make a dash for it.

The trucks and ambulances carrying wounded were placed well forward in the convoy and flanked on either side by two columns of troop transports, guns, and Bren carriers (box-shaped tractors armed with Bren machine guns). The order was given to travel at fifty-yard intervals.

Having formed, we stopped and waited for about an hour. When we did move off, in what I estimated to be a northeasterly direction, the convoy immedi-

ately became jumbled. There was a moon of sorts, but the visibility did not permit any fifty-yard interval: the various columns got completely mixed up, and we soon discovered that the only possible means of maintaining any sort of place was to crowd up to the vehicle ahead. After we had traveled a short distance, the sky was suddenly lit with flares, and tracers began to criss-cross up ahead. The convoy swung sharply to the right, and the firing ceased temporarily. By this time the only factor of order or control was the presence of a first rate Brigadier leading the way. We proceeded a short distance on our new course, and then all hell broke loose. The sky was quickly lighted by a quantity of flares; heavy firing broke out ahead and about fifty yards to the right; trucks started going up in flames, and the convoy stopped dead. There never was such a conglomeration of sights and noises. Overhead we could hear the sharp crack of anti-personnel fire; from the right a mixed stream of machine-gun and anti-tank tracers sizzled into the convoy and at odd intervals mortar bombs would explode among the mass of transport.

As an occasional truck caught fire the soldiers would leap out and scurry around looking for some means of conveyance. The orderly who had been riding with Manning and me got out and crouched beside a wheel. It seemed to me that the convoy was properly jammed, so I started toward the back of the ambulance to get the patients out. The truck immediately behind us was going up in great sheets of flame, and as I rounded the back of our ambulance

the driver abandoned his vehicle and came running toward me.

"Look," he cried. "The convoy's moving."

He ran toward the driver's seat of our car, and I followed him. Manning had kept the motor going and now moved over to let me in behind the wheel. Just then the truck driver who was standing beside me let out a yell: "Oh, God, I'm hit." Our orderly returned to the car and started counting the beads of his rosary; Manning reached around behind me and held the wounded man on the running board, and we lit out for the open spaces. There was an awful lot of traffic that hadn't been immobilized by enemy fire, and it all started to move very fast. I heard an anti-tank gunner yelling to his mates: "Let's go out and have a crack at 'em." He didn't have a chance to do any such thing, for the simple reason that the wave of traffic swept everything ahead.

We hadn't traveled more than a hundred yards when we came to what seemed an impassable obstacle: a group of tanks or anti-tank guns was pouring lead and tracer directly across our path. Miraculously enough, the vehicles ahead were rushing through this fire and mostly escaping into the darkness beyond, but I was sure that we could never get through. The large, box-like Austin ambulance in front of us met the line of tracer and received a direct hit on the right-hand side (I afterward learned that the single shell had killed two patients), and I saw a large jagged hole appear as the shell tore its explosive way through the left. I ducked my head



and drove as fast as the car would go. To my amazement, we came through without a scratch and found that we were racing along with a mass of other vehicles in the blessed peace of comparative darkness, still following the same unfortunate Austin.

For the next half-hour every truck was driven at top speed—no one having the slightest idea where we were going or how, except for the Brigadier who had somehow brought us through that ambush and had somehow managed to have us heading in an easterly direction when we came out.

When we did stop, I climbed out of the car and rushed around looking for Mort Belshaw's cars. I found Peabody and Hurd, but there was no sign of Mitchell or Sanders (Belshaw had been riding with one of the two). Peabody told me he'd seen Mitchell's car receive a direct hit, and various New Zealanders reported that they had seen Sanders' car immobilized and Sandy taking the patients out of the back. There was nothing to do but hope that somehow they'd get through and rejoin us with the stragglers who were already beginning to come along. I didn't hold out much hope for them, and I kept trying to clear my mind of the awful feeling that somehow we might have been able to do something. To this day, I can't get rid of that feeling—though I still can't figure just what we could have done. (It was a great comfort to learn after many months that they were taken prisoner and not, as I had imagined, killed.)

During our short stop we found that a fair num-

ber had been wounded in the ambush, and there was a great demand for ambulance space. We couldn't help out much, though we did take one fellow on the fender. He couldn't bend his legs, and so could not fit inside the ambulance. The fellow we'd picked up on the running board had only a superficial arm wound, and we managed to carry him by taking turns sitting on the remaining fender.

We put a good deal of distance between ourselves and the enemy during the night, and when morning came we found time to stop while the doctors administered morphine to the patients, and an issue of rum (Nelson's Blood) was passed out. It was my first experience with issue rum. I don't recommend it on an empty stomach.

We drove all that day over wicked, rocky ground, finding it almost impossible to keep up with the convoy without practically killing our patients, for the pain that resulted from their being jolted over the uneven ground was excruciating. The going was so rough that a number of patients did die—though fortunately none in our ambulance.

At six o'clock that evening we finally found a dressing-station near El Alamein, where we unloaded our patients and had a bite to eat. I fell asleep on the ground immediately after eating, only to be awakened with the news that we were to reload our patients and carry them some forty miles farther east to a casualty clearing station—and then rejoin the 5th Field Ambulance south of Alamein.

After many hours of driving in the dark we finally

found the clearing station and unloaded our patients, more dead than alive—I don't mean just the patients.

Before rolling up in a blanket to get what sleep I could before daylight, I asked a wounded New Zealand officer if there was a name for that part of the desert where the ambush took place. "Minquar Quam," said he.

## *Chapter VI*

### ALAMEIN LINE

It was the end of June when the New Zealanders fought the delaying action at Minquar Quam. I was brought back to Cairo and made lieutenant of a new platoon on the twenty-ninth of August. The period of time which passed between these two momentous events was not only crucial for the British Eighth Army: in a sense it was also the most crucial period in the life of Evan Thomas. To be perfectly frank about it, I was scared half-silly during the entire time. It didn't matter whether I was serving on the line with a New Zealand Field Ambulance or twenty miles behind the line with an English C.C.S., or even enjoying a two-day leave in Alexandria—I was constantly “windy” about the present or the future and always on the verge of telling my superiors that I wanted to go far, far away.

I can remember that July and August were divided into three distinct periods. First my section served with the 5th New Zealand Field Ambulance until the middle of July; then we had forty-eight hours leave in Alex and spent a couple of weeks doing motor ambulance convoy work between a casualty clearing station and the Alexandria hos-

pitals, and finally we worked for the 4th and 6th New Zealand Field Ambulances from August 1st to August 21st.

I liked the New Zealanders we worked with as much as I've ever liked any group of men in my life. It was probably due to the fact that I craved their respect so much that I managed to do a fairly decent job of work in spite of my low morale.

The Alamein "line" was not made up of a coördinated series of deep trenches, such as you see in pictures of the First World War. At first the only thing that gave it a semblance of stability was the inability of either belligerent to push the other back an appreciable distance. Later on, both sides laid out extensive minefields along the front and dug more or less permanent positions for the protection of men and guns, but there was always room for a certain amount of fluctuation, and the general type of fighting could never be termed trench warfare by any stretch of the imagination.

When my section first reassembled at the main dressing-station of the 5th Field Ambulance on the morning after the flight from Minquar Quam to Alamein, there was really no sort of line at all. We simply followed our brigade to a point some twenty miles south of Alamein and sat there waiting for the Germans to arrive. After a couple of days' waiting, the shooting began, and the Field Ambulance split into an A.D.S. and an M.D.S. The A.D.S. moved a few miles westward with the 5th Brigade, and the M.D.S. withdrew a few miles to the east. Bill Nich-

ols, with Ed Pattulo as spare driver (we had temporarily abandoned the idea of carrying orderlies), and Bob Sullivan, with me as spare driver, accompanied the A.D.S. company.

It didn't take us long to find out that we were off to war again. As we made our way westward, the brigade was strafed by low-flying Messerschmitts. It didn't amount to anything serious, since nobody got hurt, but it was a new experience for me and served to heighten the atmosphere of tension. A short time after the strafing episode our medical company drew up to wait while the brigade moved ahead to get established. As we were waiting, a Bren carrier came clattering up with a couple of Italian prisoners and a wounded Tommy. Apparently the carrier had been firing at some Italian trucks, and the unfortunate Tommy had been prisoner in one of them. We lifted him into Sullivan's ambulance, and then the medical officer made a hasty examination. He climbed out of the ambulance and shook his head. "No sense in sending him back to the M.D.S. He's going to die anyhow. Just carry him along, and let me know if he's still alive when we get established."

We traveled only another mile before arriving at the point where we were to set up shop, and the soldier was dead by the time we got there, but it seemed a lifetime to me between the time that we first took on our passenger and the time he died. I was in an awfully morbid state of mind and I kept wondering whether I'd be able to "feel" the moment

of his death without looking at him. The terrible thing about that was that I imagined I did.

The dressing-station (two tents, a cook truck, supply truck, and ambulances) was established on a rise of ground. Brigade headquarters was in a gully a mile to the northwest of us, and the battalions were strung out a couple of miles farther on. An artillery duel had started up almost immediately as the brigade came into position, and the captain commanding the A.D.S. decided that an ambulance should make a tour of the battalions right away to ascertain their exact location and see if there were any casualties. One of the New Zealand ambulances was detailed to do the job. The New Zealand driver asked me if I wanted to come along as "observer" for the A.F.S. drivers, so I grabbed my tin hat and climbed aboard.

The driver (his name was Cliff) was a veteran of Crete and Greece. I'd come to know him quite well during the recent delaying action, and our friendship had arrived at the point where he was always joking with me about the possibility of "collecting a packet." He had a rather macabre sense of humor. On this occasion Cliff saw fit to wax humorous over the fact that I was carefully adjusting my tin hat. "You can get killed just as easy with that thing on," said he. It wasn't long, however, before he reached for his own helmet.

Aside from the spasmodic pounding of our own artillery, our trip was a quiet one until we came in sight of the R.A.P. truck of the 21st Battalion. As

the New Zealanders would put it, the 21st was "catching a bit of iggeri." It took us some time to get up alongside the truck with the big red cross because the truck kept shifting about in an effort to find a comparatively safe position.

While we were waiting for a chance to see if there were any wounded in the truck, we had the uncomfortable experience of having four enemy shells land in a pattern, in front, behind, and on either side of us. We were both feeling a bit nervous by the time we drew up beside the R.A.P. truck.

We reported to the battalion doctor, who informed us that he already had a few wounded to be carried back to the A.D.S. but would like us to wait around for a while in case there should be some more.

It was an unpleasant wait. Darkness was settling in quickly, and we knew that we were going to have a hard job finding our way back to the A.D.S. I was cold and hungry and unaccountably nervous. At odd moments a spray of machine-gun bullets would pass uncomfortably close, and Cliff would flop down behind a wheel, dragging me with him. He never seemed particularly worried about it all. He was an old soldier and had an old soldier's reactions. Once he broke out laughing and said, "I guess you and I could do with a shot of courage to-night." The only time I ever saw Cliff really alarmed was when a wounded soldier pulled a hand grenade out of his pocket and started toying with the firing mechanism.



"Now, put that damned thing down," yelled Cliff and promptly disappeared under his ambulance.

As soon as it got dark enough to insure a thoroughly nasty trip back to the A.D.S., the report came through that all the wounded had been collected. We made our way back at the rate of three miles per hour—with me walking in front of the ambulance a good part of the way.

The next few days were marked by a series of memorable incidents. It was an odd coincidence that on the night of July Fourth I came closer to getting killed than at any other time during my enlistment in the American Field Service.

That night the 23rd New Zealand Battalion put on a feeler attack to test the strength of the enemy lines at a certain point. Two of our cars, Sullivan and myself in one and Jim Crudginton in the other, were attached to the battalion for the fireworks. The battalion medical officer had moved his R.A.P. truck right up on top of the infantry positions, and he advised us to find some deep holes and stay under cover until called on. The New Zealander 25-pounders opened the show from the rear with a fifteen-minute barrage. Since there was no counter-fire from the enemy during the barrage, I had a chance to visit the neighboring slit trenches of the reserve infantry company. I remember being very unhappily impressed by a remark passed by one of the soldiers. I had been tactless enough to ask an opinion of the possibilities of a successful attack—to which the reply was: "Oh, those bastards who do the thinking

don't know what the hell they're doing. They just try anything. We're in for it again."

Ordinarily I used to make a practice of discounting and forgetting anything that seemed to me typical soldier griping, but this remark stuck in my mind. I'd venture to say that at that time almost any soldier in the Eighth Army might have voiced the same sentiments. The morale of the men and confidence in their strategical leadership had hit an all time low. But they kept on fighting.

By the time the barrage ended I was buried deep in a nice big hole which I shared with Sullivan. Suddenly everything became quiet and stayed that way for about five minutes. That was a bad sign, since it meant that the infantry had unaccountably failed to follow up the artillery preparation. I never did find out what went wrong, but I do know that the enemy found time to set up their mortars and machine-guns, and the attack was a failure almost before it started. The period of quiet was ended abruptly by a hail of mortar bombs bursting on all sides of us—and damn near on top of us. One bomb burst so close to the edge of our slit trench that a shower of rocks and sand came raining down on my tin hat, which I was thoughtfully wearing on the side of my face.

In the midst of all the excitement, the cry went up for an ambulance. Sully immediately jumped in behind the wheel of his car, and the battalion medical officer appeared out of nowhere and climbed in beside him. As the car gathered headway I got

in the back. We drove about fifty yards toward the enemy lines along a decent stretch of gravel, then grabbed a stretcher out of the ambulance and hunted around an area of soft sand and slit trenches until we found our patient. We had a hard time finding him, because it was a very dark night and we kept throwing ourselves flat on the ground whenever anything exploded near-by. It was a bad night for walking, and we'd probably still be out there if a friend of the wounded man hadn't seen fit to leave the shelter of his slit trench and act as guide. We loaded the soldier on the stretcher and started back to the ambulance. It was a short stagger, but I'm certain that no two years of my life ever passed as slowly. This time we obviously couldn't flop without dumping our patient. We didn't dump him, either.

No sooner had we loaded him in the car and started back than a piece of mortar bomb came whizzing through the side of the car, missed my head by a couple of inches, and passed out on the other side. (I was sitting in the back on a side bench, with the patient on the floor at my feet and the doctor bending over him. That's how I know about those two inches.)

When we got back to the R.A.P. truck, the doctor decided it would be a good idea to move the R.A.P. and our two ambulances back about a mile to a safer position. We got to the safer position all right, but then that fool Sullivan had to go and volunteer to make a return trip to the infantry position. Of course, I was all for letting the regular battalion

stretcher-bearers bring the wounded back on foot, but I couldn't say much about it. As we made our way toward the front again it was obvious that the attack had been a failure; the track was crowded with weary soldiers, walking in the wrong direction. We managed to pick up some more wounded, but still the big Irishman wasn't satisfied. I believe he'd have kept on driving right up to the German lines if I hadn't persuaded him that we ought to get the casualties back to the doctor. I made up my mind then and there that Sullivan was bad company.

A couple of days after the Glorious Fourth I had another experience which came close to convincing me that I'd almost rather live the life of a slave than have any part in this war—or any war.

A column of supply trucks was parked a few hundred yards from our dressing-station. We were sitting by the cook truck eating a lunch of bully beef and tea when a number of Stukas spotted the supply column and came screaming in for the kill. There was absolutely no anti-aircraft protection in the area, and the bombers had plenty of time to take careful aim and do a proper job. In a matter of seconds the trucks were completely obliterated from our view by a cloud of dust and gray smoke. By the time the dust cleared sufficiently to restore visibility, the gray explosive smoke had given way to the black kind that rises from burning petrol and rubber. Four vehicles had been completely destroyed, and others were damaged. The raid had scarcely ended before Bill Nichols was in amongst the column loading the

wounded drivers into his ambulance. He brought in a number of casualties, and then Ed Pattulo and I drove back with him to collect the dead.

Now I had the most demoralizing experience of my life. One of the drivers had made the mistake of taking shelter under his truck—and the truck had been loaded with explosives. When we arrived on the scene with a stretcher the truck was still burning, and the body of the driver was lying a few yards away, where it had been blown by the force of the explosion. I'd seen plenty of dead men by this time but never one like this. His clothes had been blown completely off; there was nothing left of his feet, and his flesh was charred and roasted. There was nothing *unusually* terrible about this. The awful thing was that he had been burned so quickly that his features had been frozen into an expression too awful to describe. Instead of being characterized by the usual impersonal stare of death, this man's face portrayed an emotion and a personality that were as real as life.

I had had very little sleep in the past ten days, and I had been constantly tired, nervous, and frightened. This brought me closer to the breaking point than I care to think about even now. As a matter of fact, it had such a profound effect on my mind that I turned into an out-and-out pacifist and stayed that way for the next two months.

Fortunately our section was temporarily relieved within a few days, but before that time I spent an uncomfortable twenty-four hours in Ed Pattulo's am-

bulance attached to an advanced Indian tactical headquarters. The tactical headquarters was six miles in front of the New Zealand positions. It was under spasmodic shell-fire and was twice raided by heavy Italian bombers and once by a flight of twenty-four Stukas. The Italians bombed from a high level and didn't hit anything, but the Stukas came diving down out of the sun with sirens going full blast and effected considerable damage. At the time of the Stuka raid, Ed and I had just moved our ambulance away from the point where we had dug our slit trenches for the night, in an attempt to get out of the area that was being shelled. We were caught on hard ground with no slit trenches, and there was nothing to do but get under the ambulance—for psychological protection if nothing else. I had never heard Stukas using their sirens before, and I remembered thinking that the unusual amount of screaming combined with the whistling of the bombs indicated that a bomb was coming straight for me. I can still see myself lying under that ambulance, looking at Ed Pattulo, who had his eyes tight shut, and thinking: "Well, this is it." It wasn't. Actually, it was a lucky thing that we had moved. An English driver who had drawn up beside our old slit trenches when he saw the bombs coming was severely wounded by a fragment that hit him in the leg.

It was a great relief to be ordered back to the New Zealand M.D.S. (we had just been on loan to the Indians) and a still greater relief upon arriving at

that blessed spot to be informed that we were due for a forty-eight-hour leave in Alexandria.

Of the twelve sections that made up the two platoons of the Field Service company at that time, four had been serving with the various New Zealand Field Ambulances and eight had been temporarily cooling their heels in the Alexandria and Delta area. Also, a number of new boys had come from Syria to replace some of the "Tobruk veterans" and were yelling for action. Hence the quick relief.

We arrived in Alexandria in time to celebrate my birthday. It wasn't exactly the best birthday I've ever had, but it could have been a lot worse. We checked in at the Hotel Windsor a couple of hours before lunch and hired some luxurious rooms with big French windows facing the harbor. It was only a matter of minutes before I had taken a few tentative bounces on my beautifully fresh bed, stripped off my filthy clothes, and subsided into a hot bath. Somebody ought to write a poem about hot baths—or at least about that one. It provided that rarest of all sensations—happiness combined with complete relaxation. After the bath I spent a pleasant half-hour scratching at the friendly crab lice which infested the hairy parts of my body and then made my way down to the bar, where my friends had assembled to inaugurate a program of serious drinking. We interrupted the program to put away a five-course luncheon in the hotel dining-room, and then I went back to my room to take a nap and write some letters.

While I was writing I noticed that the room boasted one of those trick full-length mirrors with swinging sides. The mirror interfered a lot with my efforts at correspondence. There's something about a big mirror when you haven't seen one for a long time that's peculiarly distracting. I may be abnormal about that sort of thing, but I'm willing to bet that there aren't many people who wouldn't have given that mirror (and of course their own reflections) a good deal of consideration under the circumstances.

That evening Bob Sullivan threw a birthday party for me at the Café Excelsior. The food was terrible and the liquor was worse, but I think we had a pretty good time. I remember trying to get up my courage to dance with one of the girls that belonged to the establishment. I guess they weren't exactly prize winners, but they looked so glamorous to me that I was afraid to get that close to them.

The second day of our two-day leave I spent in bed, vomiting large quantities of half-digested food into a gilt-handled thunder mug. I didn't get much chance to inspect the city. All I can remember is that the streets were fairly empty, since a good part of the population had evacuated; that there was a special 11:30 P.M. curfew, and that the European quarter of the town looked fresh and clean, whereas the native quarter looked quite the opposite.

After our forty-eight-hour leave, we spent a couple of weeks attached to a casualty clearing station twenty miles behind the lines and ferried patients in to the Alexandria hospitals. It was easy work, and



I should have welcomed the change if it hadn't been for the fact that at that time it was announced that most of the original sections which had been at Tobruk were about to swap jobs with the members of the two Syrian platoons. I was desperately anxious to return to the peace and quiet of Syria but didn't dare say so. As a result of my reticence, Lieutenant Geer continued to labor under the delusion (gained in Tobruk) that my section was made up of a bunch of fire-eaters and consequently promised that we would be especially favored with another tour of Field Ambulance duty. I really dreaded the prospect of going back to war but fortunately managed to keep fairly quiet about it.

There was something quite amusing about Geer's conviction that he was doing me a favor by giving me "another crack at it." As a matter of fact, I'm very glad now that I never did go back up to Syria, but at the time I looked at things differently.

I remember that just before we went back to the lines again, Andy said: "I'll go up with you this time and we'll have some fun."

I also remember the surprised look on his face when I retorted: "Fun, hell! I'm perfectly willing to do the job we came over to do, but please don't call it fun."

Actually our second spell with the New Zealanders wasn't very terrifying, since there was a decided lull in the fighting, but I'd got myself in such an unnatural state of nervousness that I hated every minute of it. For some reason I expected the world

to come to an end at any instant. This time I spent a couple of days hanging around the 4th Field Ambulance M.D.S., ten days with Jim Crudgington at an artillery R.A.P., and the remainder of the time at the 6th Field Ambulance A.D.S. Things were so quiet that the only times I ran into any danger at all were when the artillery was raided on three successive mornings by a small number of Messerschmitt 109's carrying anti-personnel bombs.

There was an empty gun pit a couple of hundred yards away from the R.A.P. truck which must have looked pretty formidable from the air. At any rate, it seemed to be the target that interested the German pilots. Crudgington and I developed a sorry way of life while we were attached to the gunners; we had hardly any driving to do, so we spent most of our time, when we weren't eating or sleeping, sitting in the front seats of the ambulance cursing the heat and flies and speculating on how soon disaster would strike the Allied cause. I'm ashamed to think about what a gloomy character I was then. Maybe it had something to do with thick black clouds of flies that were always settling on our legs, arms, and faces, giving us an extra dark outlook on life.

Fred Hoing, who had brought his platoon down from Syria, was the officer in charge of the cars attached to the New Zealand Division at that time. He used to pay us a call every morning and give a résumé of the radio news he'd heard at the M.D.S. It was invariably discouraging—so much so that we had visions of the Germans walking gaily over the

Caucasus Mountains and into the Middle East through the back door.

One evening Major King, our commanding officer, paid us an informal visit which resulted in an interesting discussion. King was always on the look-out for a chance to increase the reputation of the American Field Service as the ambulance unit *par excellence*. For that reason he had been making a tour of the big guns in the medical hierarchy, to persuade them that the A.F.S. ambulances should not only be pushed to the fore in the infantry divisions but also used as pick-up cars with the active tank units. He was all for having as many Field Service cars as possible employed where the fighting was thickest.

I agreed with Major King in principle, but at the same time I was convinced, and still am, that there's such a thing as sticking your neck out too far. I had had a chance to observe the reactions of the boys who had just come down from Syria screaming for action and also my own reactions and those of my comrades in the original "Tobruk platoons," and I had come to the conclusion that the greatest mistake the A.F.S. could make would be to let the Field Service drivers get the impression that they were doing specially hazardous jobs, over and above what was expected of regular Field Ambulance drivers.

We had already had some slight trouble with the regular New Zealand drivers because the remark had been passed that they were leaving the dirty work for the A.F.S. ambulances. Now it was perfectly true that the New Zealand drivers didn't make

a practice of rushing around with the youthful abandon which characterized the activities of our boys in their first flush of enthusiasm over being "at the front"—A.F.S. drivers used to appear at the scene of a bombing almost before the bombs had exploded—but it was also true that the New Zealand drivers had been doing a good reliable job of work for two-and-a-half years of warfare and would continue to work without question of relief as long as their services were required. On the other hand, we of the A.F.S. were prone to think of our periods of field ambulance work as special missions, to be performed brilliantly but not at length.

My idea was that the A.F.S. could be counted on to do a good job under any circumstances, provided that we took the job as routine work and not as a special adventure. Therefore I felt it was a great mistake to keep asking the medical authorities for these special adventures.

As I discussed my ideas with Major King, I had an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps I was simply rationalizing my own reactions. In any case, I was soon to have the satisfaction of seeing the members of my own platoon accepting field ambulance work as an everyday routine and getting a lot of work done while they were at it.

I was ordered back to Cairo some time before Rommel put on his unsuccessful September attempt at breaking the Eighth Army defenses, but before leaving I was attached to an advanced dressing-station long enough to be an eye-witness to the prep-

aration of the Auchinleck-Montgomery trap. Few people allow any credit to General Auchinleck for the September defeat of Rommel's forces, but, as I understand it, the basic plans were drawn up by him before he was relieved by the Alexander-Montgomery combination. I have been given to understand that the commanders, Montgomery in particular, "toughened" the plan to such an extent that the westernmost line of troops was deprived of the alternative of a possible withdrawal: they simply had to hold their positions.

Here's the way the preparations were carried out. The veteran divisions holding the western defensive positions were to form an immovable wall running north and south. This wall was protected in the rear by a new series of minefields, large reserves of supplies were brought up, and Field Ambulance advance dressing-stations were moved in close to the lines. Then the area behind this self-sufficient wall, or extended box, was cleared of all such impediments as supply and transport echelons, leaving a free space for the armor to maneuver. The free space ran in a six- or eight-mile-wide strip from north to south and was bordered on the east by another line composed of new infantry and artillery units. The westernmost line was purposely weakened at a point to the south, and this was to provide a mouth for the trap. While preparations were being made, the armored divisions used to practise racing around in the open strip, so that the minute Rommel should stick out his head

they could arrive at the proper point and time and spring the trap.

Just before I left for Cairo, our advanced dressing-station was moved forward into the extended box, unhappily jammed in with a lot of noisy artillery, and it was revealed to us in a special order that a big attack was expected, that there would be no retreat, and that every man would be expected to stick to his job with no thought of surrender.

My old friend Tom DePew arrived from Syria in time to take over command of the Field Service cars attached to the New Zealand Division during the September battle. For a time it looked as though we were going to have our long-sought-for chance of working together, but by the time the big noise started I was back in Cairo with a new job on my hands.

## *Chapter VII*

### TEMPORARY GENTLEMAN

A lieutenant in the Field Service is a very strange animal. He's not a lieutenant in the American Army, or the British Army, or any army at all. In fact, he's not really a lieutenant. It simply happened that in working with the British it was necessary for the A.F.S. to organize along lines that the British would understand—that is, in companies and platoons, with appropriate officers commanding. Field Service officers are (or were) "commissioned" by an order from the officer commanding the A.F.S. in the Middle East (Colonel Richmond), with the approval of the Director General in New York (Mr. Stephen Gallati), and hold their commissions on an extremely temporary basis. It requires no court-martial to "break" an A.F.S. officer. The uniform is the regular British field dress, and the rank is indicated by a reasonable facsimile of British insignia.

No Field Service man is required to salute a Field Service officer or address him as "sir." In fact, the only difference between an officer and an "other rank" (British for enlisted man) in the A.F.S. is the fact that the officer looks something like a British officer, occasionally messes with the officers of the

unit to which he is attached, and bears an extra weight of responsibility. Of course there are no differences in pay, since there is no such thing as pay in the A.F.S. In spite of the lack of obvious personal advantages to be derived from this type of commission, I must admit that from the beginning to the end my lieutenancy was not only a joy to my ego but also the source of the most valuable experience I have ever known.

The circumstances under which I was promoted couldn't have been more favorable. I was given command of one of two new platoons fresh from home and full of enthusiasm. A good friend of mine, Art Howe, who had been a sergeant in the desert, was given command of the other, and Andy Geer, who had been elevated to the rank of captain, was put over us as commanding officer. We were given the privilege of training our own men according to our own lights and were issued completely new equipment, from ambulances to screw-drivers. Furthermore, we were allowed to pick our own N.C.O.'s from among the veterans who had been serving in the desert. Altogether, the Field Service couldn't have provided us with a better situation.

Art Howe and I arrived in Cairo for a few days before our boys landed in Egypt and spent a short leave washing the dust from our insides and out, and collecting an occasional salute from the English soldiers, who were under the happy impression that we were genuine officers. As always when on leave I resisted the temptation to go sight-seeing and con-



centrated on the business of comfortable living. As a matter of fact, I never was particularly attracted by the "glories of the east" in any part of Egypt, since I had a loathing for the country and the people that would have been hard for even the most intolerant first-class tourist to match.

We met Andy Geer in Cairo and journeyed out to the R.A.S.C. mobilization center in time to get things ready for our men. On September 7th, Andy and Art went down to Port Tewfik to act as a welcoming committee, and I stayed around the camp to complete some last-minute details. I was sitting in my tent about tea time, wondering just what sort of an awful impression I was going to make on my platoon, when one of the N.C.O.'s came in to say that a hundred men were lined up outside waiting for some one to tell them what to do.

Up to this minute my newly-acquired status of acting officer and temporary gentleman had been pure gravy. Now I began to realize that I had a job on my hands. I felt terribly young and foolish; my knees were shaking, and I couldn't help feeling that the new men would probably mutiny at first sight of their new officer. Strangely enough, they were actually quite friendly and seemed willing enough to eat their suppers and locate their assigned tents without so much as a growl. I don't know just what sort of an impression I did make on the new men, but I remember being very favorably impressed by them. They were certainly a better looking lot than the

original "Italian prisoners" contingent that had first disembarked at Bombay back in December, 1941.

Early the next morning Captain Geer made a welcoming speech to the assembled members of the "15th Ambulance Car Company, American Field Service" (our official designation), and we embarked on a program of three weeks' training. I was extremely fortunate in having as N.C.O.'s in my platoon seven men who had been in the original first unit, who had gone through all the growing pains of the winter in Syria, and had had experience in every possible type of ambulance work. Bill Nichols, Doug Atwood, Bob Murphy, Carl Keyser, Chick Leister, and Scotty Gilmore headed my six sections, and Jack Pemberton was platoon sergeant. (He was later sent up to Syria at the end of the training period, and Doug Atwood took his place.) Jack was the driving force of the platoon: a first-rate mechanic and a glutton for work, he was always rushing around on a motorcycle, attending to the countless details involved in assigning and equipping vehicles, issuing personal equipment, and rounding up people for the daily schedule of lectures, exercises, and instruction. The section N.C.O.'s handled the task of detailed practical instruction in vehicle maintenance, map reading, etc. I was therefore free to concern myself with matters of policy, general lectures, paper work, overall supervision, and the interminable grind of censoring mail.

During a typical day, I spent about two hours censoring mail with Art Howe, an hour lecturing in

the mess tent, two hours trying to figure out official documents that kept coming in from our Royal Army Service Corps workshops, an hour listening to complaints about section assignments, and the rest of the time wandering about the ambulance dispersal area, wondering where in hell every one had disappeared to.

I rather enjoyed the lecture periods, since they gave me a chance to air some views I'd been carrying around for a long time. I was—and still am—hipped on the idea that volunteer ambulance drivers ought to get over the idea that they are gentlemen soldiers of fortune at the earliest opportunity. Ambulance driving is a wonderful chance for an essential and thoroughly worth-while type of service, but neither the nature of the job nor the relative responsibility involved entitles the volunteer driver to look upon himself as a trick officer engaged in a glamorous special mission. A good many people were sick to death of the spectacle of a few irresponsible men bringing disgrace on the generally good name of the Field Service in the Middle East by going around with a chip on their shoulder and the idea that they were God's elect—a class apart from ordinary soldiers who had to go on doing a dirty job day after day whether they liked it or not. I was, therefore, particularly anxious that the men in my platoon should understand immediately that, although unpaid voluntary service did entitle them to certain privileges not enjoyed by the British Tommy, still they were first of all *ambulance drivers* and could save every

one a lot of grief and irritation if they accepted the fact and didn't pretend they were anything else.

I did my best to explain that our primary duty was to be prepared at any time of the day or night to proceed to any given point, pick up the sick or wounded, and carry them off in a car that was properly equipped and in good running order. According to my way of thinking, everything else was incidental to that, the most important incidental being that we should go about our jobs in such a manner that we might cause a minimum of trouble for other people. In particular, we should make sure that no medical officer should ever have to divert his attention from his specialized job to worry about the problems of the ambulance evacuation, and no war-weary service corps driver should have his job made more difficult by a lot of fancy-driving Americans "showing their stuff" on the crowded tracks and roads.

Having explained my own general theories on the attitudes and duties of an ambulance driver I attempted in subsequent lectures to give some idea of British Army organization, evacuation systems, map reading, use of the prismatic and sun compasses, vehicle maintenance, convoy discipline, and life in the desert. I didn't have time to go into a great deal of detail, but I knew that I could depend on the N.C.O.'s to supply the deficiencies, and my main object was to give a broad picture with emphasis on the fact that there was nothing so tricky about the

job of being an ambulance driver that a normal boy couldn't cope with it. I remembered how frightened I had been when somebody had told me that I'd have to learn "desert navigation," so I made a point of trying to steer away from the trick phrases which are legitimate enough but quite unnecessary. I let it be known that no individual driver would be called on to do any complicated "navigating" and that even if he should be, it was a simple business of drawing a straight line between two points and employing an old-fashioned protractor. Fortunately the grid lines in the maps of the western desert run true enough north and south, east and west, so that it is not even necessary to compute variations. The effect of the vehicle on a compass may be reckoned by walking a few yards out in front and checking with a simple back-dialing.

Toward the end of our three weeks at the mobilization center, I took my platoon out on an overnight exercise in the desert. I got hold of a lot of maps, sun compasses, and prismatic compasses, and had each section take turns leading the convoy on a compass course. The exercise was a tremendous success. We covered over forty miles of unmarked desert, some of it rocky and rolling, some of it soft sand, and the new men kept well and truly to the accurate courses they had reckoned on the map with their own acquired knowledge. We came back to camp by road in order to get in some practice in keeping convoy discipline through traffic. It was with considerable pride that I viewed the line of ambulances

strung out behind me—pride mixed with confidence that this platoon would be a credit to the A.F.S. and those of us who had a hand in its organization and training.

Aside from practical considerations, our overnight jaunt was particularly valuable to me since I had heretofore been a bit shy of getting to know the men under my command and had kept to my own tent as much as possible back at camp. Now that I was thrown in with them, I found that almost everybody was easy to get along with and could best be treated as a friend instead of as a subordinate. (One good thing about the Field Service was that no officer could get away with treating anybody as a subordinate for very long.) They were mostly normal young men who seemed anxious to learn and anxious to do a good job. Although there were quite a few college boys and boys just out of college, I think that, without exception, they had all worked for a living at one time or another and easily escaped the classification of gentlemen tourists. As a matter of fact, quite a few of them had given up good jobs to join the American Field Service and could not be considered "draft dodgers" by any stretch of the imagination, since at the time of their enlistment the draft boards had discontinued the practice of releasing men with 1-A classification to serve as ambulance drivers.

I remember rushing into Andy Geer's tent immediately after we returned from our overnight exercise and announcing that my platoon was about the

best that ever lived, to which Andy replied: "I think we've got a pretty good company."

And so we had. For one thing, the work of the other (original) Field Service company had had a lot to do with it, since the new men had an established example of good work to live up to and therefore had not been tempted to act as individuals who were too good for the organization as a whole. For another thing, the company had in Andy Geer a commander who obviously knew what he was doing. Andy was something of a militarist about organizational matters, but it was all for the best, since he was the only officer in the entire Field Service who had taken the trouble to figure out just what made the wheels go round in the British Army. In working with the British, Andy knew just what to do and when to do it, and he didn't turn himself inside out to try to ape them. Quite the opposite. He was a story-book American, a great husky "Yank," though with less of a chip on his shoulder than most, and the British loved it. Andy's only fault was that he was a born sensationalist. But if you pinned him down and asked a straight question you had a better than average chance of getting a straight answer.

During our stay at the Royal Army Service Corps Mobilization Center, Andy and I were invited to take our meals at the commandant's mess, an invitation that we were obliged, and only too glad, to accept. It was quite an experience for me. I had never eaten in any sort of officer's mess before, and this was a very formal affair. Moreover, I was the

youngest officer there and didn't know a soul with the exception of Andy and Captain Eric Waller who had instructed us on our first visit to the mobilization center and had been responsible for my invitation. At first I was very unhappy about the whole performance, and my knees shook perceptibly every time I went in to take a meal, especially if the old colonel was there, in which case I was supposed to click my heels, bow, and say: "Good evening, sir," or some such thing. But after a while I got so I looked upon mealtime as the high spot of the day. The food was excellent, about what you would get in a good boarding house—soup, meat, vegetables, pastry, and the ever-present tea—the company delightful, and the liquor well worth drinking.

Of course the company was the most important thing. The officers in the mess were probably rather average British officers, middle- or upper middle-class Englishmen, but in the long run I found that I couldn't have hand-picked a more decent and likable group of people. It's very hard for an American to understand Englishmen, particularly English officers. Americans are far too prone to judge by superficial first impressions, and I'm no exception. To me the English officers had always seemed intolerable snobs who probably had very little to be snobbish about. In fact, at one time I had gone beyond social relations and imagined that the reason for Britain's current military set-back was the incompetence of her "high hat" young officers, who seemed to have very



little genuineness underneath it all. I'm ready to say right now that I was terribly wrong.

I still can't say that I approve of a caste system so definitely established that different economic classes not only look different, but also speak different languages, but I can say that in his *immediate personal* relations the average British officer is about as decent a fellow as can be found, and on the battlefield there is no group of men in this world who can surpass the gallantry of the officers. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that British military set-backs might be partially attributed to too much gallantry and not enough thought on the part of senior officers, but never to a lack of "what it takes." I am inclined to believe the much-told story of a British colonel leading his tanks against a row of dug-in 88-mm. guns with the order to "gallop."

In this day and age it has become almost mandatory for intelligent people to look upon the "old school tie" with scorn, but I'm here to say that no matter what you say about the English public school system, it has given some otherwise quite ordinary people an extra sense of obligation to "never let down the side" (I am not using the phrase facetiously), which has proved invaluable to the British Empire.

Bravery is a strange thing. It is quite possible for an ordinary soldier to go on fighting, even though he may be wet with fear, because he has a self-imposed obligation not to let down his comrades—his own

self-respect depending upon the respect of others. How much more possible, then, for a man to go on fighting if he has not only this primary obligation but also a greater one to which he has been bred and conditioned.

Of course, not all British officers are public school products, and I don't mean to imply that it takes a public school education to make a good officer. I do mean that in wartime the "old school tie" can be of real value in elevating a group which might not otherwise be at all exceptional.

At the end of our three weeks' training period we were ordered to a reserve area in the desert, and my platoon was attached temporarily to a light casualty clearing station. I had been issued a "fifteen hundredweight" Dodge pick-up truck before leaving the mobilization center, and spent a couple of weeks sitting in the back of it swatting flies and pretending to be busy, while the men of my platoon got some good practice evacuating the sick and wounded back to a base hospital.

The second week in October I was seriously tempted to leave the American Field Service and head for home with the members of our original unit, who were pulling up stakes at the end of their year's enlistment, but at the same time I learned that the big offensive could be expected at any minute, so I decided to stay with my platoon at least until the end of the initial action. This decision turned out to be about the smartest I ever made.

## *Chapter VIII*

### VICTORY

The Battle of Alamein was a noisy affair, and a number of people got hurt. Aside from these two factors, it seemed totally unrelated to my previous experiences of active warfare. This time I was confident of a successful outcome; this time it all made sense to me, and this time I had a sense of responsibility for others that left me very little time to think about the chances of losing my own skin.

While the British and Imperial troops had never lost their remarkable spirit of "carry on" even in the darkest days of catastrophe and defeat, still their confidence in their commanders and their general morale had for a time been so low that it was now remarkable to sense the change in atmosphere. For one thing, Rommel had been successfully checked in the September action, and for another thing, every one knew that an end had come to the old business of squirting a garden hose at a four-alarm fire. As one New Zealander put it: "We've got the men; we've got the equipment; and here we go—rip, split, or bust!"

During the Alamein Battle, three of my sections were attached to a South African C.C.S. about ten

miles behind the lines, and the other three sections were attached to the 5th and 6th New Zealand Field Ambulances. The 4th New Zealand Field Ambulance was not operating, since the 4th Brigade was back at Maadi being trained as an armored unit. I left Doug Atwood, the platoon sergeant, in charge of the C.C.S. ambulances and spent most of my time trying to keep track of the Field Ambulance boys. Actually I had three excellent N.C.O.'s—Bill Nichols, Scot Gilmore, and Chuck Larrow—in charge of the Field Ambulance sections, and they could have taken care of themselves perfectly well, but since all the drivers were new at their jobs, I felt that it was my responsibility to know just where every one was and why. Also, it was necessary from the organizational point of view to have a central authority.

On the day of October 23rd, the New Zealanders moved up from their reserve positions and made ready to go into the line a few miles south of the coast road. They were flanked on the right by the Highland Division and on the left by South Africans. One of my sections moved up with the 5th A.D.S., another with the 5th M.D.S. The 5th M.D.S. was to handle all New Zealand casualties, and it had originally been my idea to maintain a sort of headquarters at this M.D.S., since all my New Zealand cars would be evacuating into that station. However, when the fighting actually started, I felt that I couldn't keep in close enough touch with things there and consequently spent my time jumping around the advance dressing-stations.

I was terribly anxious to have the drivers in my platoon live up to the high standard set by the men of the original Field Service Company, who had worked for the New Zealand division—particularly since there was a great deal of rivalry between platoons and companies, and a certain amount of resentment over the fact that members of a brand-new platoon had drawn the much coveted New Zealand assignment. Consequently, I was always trying to be in at least two places at once, in an effort to satisfy myself that everything was being done properly. For the first few days of the battle, I think the boys were glad enough to have me around and didn't really mind my nagging at all, but after a while my presence was probably uncalled for and not too welcome. In any case, the twelve days of the Alamein Battle were about as hectic for me as anything I have ever experienced.

On the night the battle started (the 23rd), I was asked to deliver a case of fresh blood to the 6th Field Ambulance A.D.S. I had been waiting all day for an excuse to examine the route between the M.D.S. and the two advance stations, and this gave me a good chance to look things over before the fighting began. The engineers had marked out a series of tracks running west from the "road" that ran south from Alamein. These tracks were named Sun, Moon, Star, Bottle, Boat, and Hat, and bore appropriate insignia. They were so well marked that it was practically impossible to get lost as long as one stuck to the tracks, but it was all too easy to get into

trouble when it became necessary to leave the tracks and hunt for a specific point, for the area was honey-combed with poorly marked minefields and camouflaged gun positions. Of course the 6th A.D.S. hadn't even moved up at the time I arrived at their map location, so I spent an uncomfortable hour wandering around asking questions of miscellaneous officers and men. I made myself thoroughly unpopular, since every one was feeling quite jumpy. Nobody was particularly interested in my problems anyhow. God knows they had enough to worry about.

Finally I found a South African dressing-station, where the commanding officer told me that the 6th A.D.S. was moving in alongside and the 5th A.D.S. would be situated a couple of miles to the north. I settled down in a nice hole with a couple of young South African officers and waited for the arrival of the New Zealanders and the start of the great barrage.

It was quarter past nine when I sat down with the South Africans, and the barrage started at 9:40. None of us had met before, and yet the atmosphere was such that before our twenty-five-minute acquaintanceship had ended, we were on terms of intimacy which are seldom equaled among friends of long standing. Under the bright moon, we could see groups of artillerymen making last-minute preparations around the 25-pounders which were to play such an important role in the night's activities. To the east, we could hear the tanks beginning to clatter toward the lines. Yet in spite of these obvious

indications of human activity, we might as well have been alone together on a desert island. Something prompted us to speak in voices so low that we were practically whispering. We talked about our own homes for the most part, though for a time we discussed South Africa and the part she was playing in the war.

In connection with the conversation about South Africa, I remember that my new friends had an attitude towards the racial question which would have seemed shocking to Georgia's Eugene Talmadge himself, and yet at the time, I accepted it as absolutely logical.

Five minutes before the barrage was scheduled to start, our conversation began to drop off, and we sat glancing from our watches to the 25-pounder batteries which were just a few hundred yards to the east of us. One of the South Africans disappeared momentarily into a near-by dugout and came out with a bottle of whisky. He poured some into a tin cup and handed it to me. The effect of the raw whisky was amazing; instead of dulling my senses, it sharpened them to the point where I was not only in complete sympathy with the men who were about to initiate the attack, but also with the enemy to the west. It was almost as if I were living each individual experience myself. For a brief moment, I had a feeling of alarm which couldn't have been more acute if I had been on the opposite side of the line with full knowledge of the awful storm approaching. The barrage started exactly on schedule. I knew

when it was coming—I even had some idea what it would be like, and yet I distinctly remember at first being surprised by the terrible and continuous force of explosion, the blinding flashes, and smell of gunpowder. There were so many guns firing, and the rate of fire was so rapid, that the sky was illuminated in a continuous line running from north to south as far as the eye could see.

My New Zealand friends, with Scotty Gilmore's section of ambulances attached, put in an appearance about quarter of ten, and I drove over to deliver the blood and see how the boys were enjoying their first barrage. I was pleased to notice that the ambulances were well dispersed and every one was happily employed digging slit trenches.

Scotty Gilmore and I found ourselves an abandoned dugout near the reception tent and pretended we were going to get some rest before the work began. Of course, we were much too excited to settle down for more than five minutes at a time and consequently did a lot of wandering around looking for some one to talk to.

The continuous barrage was sustained along the entire front until ten o'clock and then seemed to become more sporadic and therefore somewhat less intense. Shortly after ten there was sufficient lull in the firing so that we could hear the wail of the Scottish bagpipes as the Highland Infantry moved forward on the right flank of the New Zealanders. I had heard many tales of how the Highlanders traditionally went into battle with bagpipes playing,



but I was nevertheless surprised to hear the pipes with my own ears. Even from a distance, the "music" is enough to make your skin creep. It can't have failed to have a demoralizing effect on the enemy.

It wasn't until 1:30 that our Field Service cars were called on to start working, and then five cars were ordered to the 24th Battalion R.A.P. I decided to go along as a spare driver for a friend of mine named Brook Cuddy.

We drove westward on a dusty track crowded with tanks and Bren carriers getting ready to move out and cover the infantry positions at dawn. It was touchy work by-passing the concentrations of armor, since it was, of course, necessary to leave the proper path of the track at times and take a chance of running into a slit trench or perhaps a stray mine. However, we found the 24th R.A.P. truck without mishap and loaded three of our cars quickly. I was about to settle down and wait for more casualties to fill the two remaining cars, when a very excited padre came rushing up and told me that the 25th Battalion was a few hundred yards to the west and needed ambulances in the worst way.

I had learned to mistrust directions from people who said things were a "few hundred yards" one way or another, so I tried to pin him down to a more specific statement.

"Which side of the track? How many hundred yards?" I asked.

"Oh, less than a mile. Perhaps half a mile—right near the track," he answered.

It took us two hours to find the 25th Battalion, and by the time we got there, it was a good three miles west of where it should have been according to our informant. We had to work our way through and around the tanks, across the British minefields, across what had been no man's land, and across the German minefields, before we reached our destination—and when we did get there we found that neither the battalion doctor nor his R.A.P. truck had put in an appearance. The battalion had just taken its second objective, but the wounded were still scattered all over.

That was a mighty unpleasant trip in many ways, especially since we had to wait for an hour, in company with a great number of tanks, on the east side of the German minefield, while the engineers cleared a lane. The enemy gunners must have been awfully busy withdrawing, or they would surely have subjected that dense mass of armor to a ruinous pounding. As it was, they managed to land an occasional shell in the neighborhood. While we were waiting I climbed out of the ambulance and asked a friendly engineer if he'd help us get through the minefield before the tanks got in and jammed things up. Luckily he thought I was a doctor and promised that our two ambulances could get through immediately behind the engineers' truck. He smiled and said: "We'll drive ahead of you, sir—just in case."

I couldn't help thinking what a wonderful set for a movie that scene would have made. It certainly had about every possible element required for a

composite battle scene: the infantry banging away on the far side of the minefield with rifles, mortars, and machine-guns; long lines of tanks shifting about on the near side; the engineers nonchalantly going about their business of clearing a passage: shells and mines exploding at odd intervals, and a great white moon shining down through a haze of fine dust, creating a unique lighting effect.

I had expected the 25th Battalion to greet us with open arms when we finally did get through to them, but every one seemed too tired and preoccupied to get enthusiastic about anything. I found a young captain and told him we'd be glad to evacuate as many casualties as our ambulances could carry.

"Ambulances?" said he. "Well, we haven't really had time to collect our wounded. Perhaps you'd see to that? I'll send over a guide. Better hurry up and get those ambulances away."

He sounded like a man who has just finished running a hard race and is having trouble bringing himself back into his immediate surroundings.

It took us a good half-hour to find enough casualties to fill our ambulances. I know for a fact that we should have been able to fill the ambulances twice over, but it was like pulling teeth to try and persuade any one—even the battalion stretcher-bearers—to take a real interest in what normally would have been a common task. This was the most marked exception to a general rule of behavior that one could possibly find. I've never known a time before or since when fighting soldiers were not willing to

drop everything in an effort to get their wounded comrades started toward a dressing-station. The only explanation I've ever been able to figure out is that we had arrived too soon after the battalion had taken its objective, and the men hadn't had time to bring themselves out of the strain and tension of the attack.

It's very rare for ambulance drivers to join in the work of battalion stretcher-bearers, since the dirty work is usually done at the time and place of the action, and ambulances don't exactly drive into the midst of an infantry engagement. The only time I'd really done any stretcher-bearing before was on the night of July 4th, and that had been one quick trip, but this time I had a good chance to find out just what a nasty job a stretcher-bearer had. At one time Brook Cuddy and I accompanied two New Zealanders out in front of the infantry positions and had the unpleasant experience of finding ourselves sitting among a group of mangled bodies while an enemy machine-gun sprayed a stream of tracer in our direction. We'd probably still be out there if it weren't for the fact that a column of British tanks came clattering through on the right and diverted the fire.

We drove back to the A.D.S. just as dawn was breaking. Once again we had to fight our way past the tanks and through the narrow minefield lanes. It must have been a terrible trip for the wounded, who had received no medical attention of any sort. The ground was rough; we kept scraping up against the sides of the oncoming tanks, and an occasional

shell landed close enough to the track to add a degree of mental discomfort to their physical agonies. This was the first time that Brook Cuddy had ever driven an ambulance-load of screaming wounded, and I practically had to chew his ear off to persuade him to travel over three miles per hour.

It was full daylight when we arrived at the 6th A.D.S. There was a great rush of work as the casualties were pouring in from the battalions, being quickly and efficiently treated, and loaded into ambulances to be evacuated to the main dressing-station. Scotty Gilmore's boys didn't seem to be having any trouble getting into the swing of things and were busy shuttling back and forth between stations with a good routine efficiency. I stopped long enough to find out that the night attack had been a complete success for the 6th Brigade, which had managed to take all objectives right on schedule. Then I drove over to the 5th A.D.S. to find out how Bill Nichols' section and the 5th Brigade were making out. Here again I was pleased to find that the A.F.S. boys were handling their assignments like veterans, and that every one was very cheerful about the success of the 5th Brigade operations. Bill was somewhat put out because his cars were being used exclusively for the M.D.S. run and had not been sent out to the battalions. He wanted me to ask the company commanding officer to assign the Field Service cars to more exciting work, but this I refused to do. I did agree to let the commanding officer know that he should feel free to use our cars for any sort of work,

but I couldn't see my way clear to asking for special assignments. For one thing, I knew that all the drivers would get plenty of blood and thunder before the battle ended, and for another thing, I was convinced that they would do a better long-term routine job if they took things as they came and didn't play the short and snappy game of temporary fire-eaters.

Since there was a shortage of ambulances at both the advance dressing-stations, I went back to the M.D.S. and split up Chuck Larrow's section, assigning two cars to the 5th A.D.S., and three to the 6th. The M.D.S. looked like a scene from *Gone with the Wind* (station scene, siege of Atlanta) since there wasn't enough room inside the tents to hold all the patients awaiting treatment. However, the general atmosphere was cheerful enough and the doctors were doing a remarkable job of rushing things through and at the same time seeing to it that no man was deprived of his right to the best available care.

How different this was from the early summer days of defeat and discouragement! Word had got around that the enemy had suffered a "hell of a knock" in the opening stages of the battle, and a good many of the wounded undoubtedly were comforting themselves with the double consolation that they had borne a hand in a good piece of work and were now well out of it. It's the most natural thing in the world for a man, no matter how much he may talk about wanting to "get back and have another

crack at it," to feel a sense of relief when he can make an honorable exit from the strain of battle.

I felt a great sense of personal relief and comfort as I left the main dressing-station and made my way back to the battle area; the general situation seemed to be better than it had been for many months, and somehow the problem of getting my three Field Ambulance sections settled into their jobs had been solved overnight. The boys just seemed to fit in as a matter of course. Furthermore, I had the satisfaction of knowing that the dressing-stations would probably not be changing positions for a few days now, and I could settle down to a routine of shuttling back and forth between definitely established points. For the next three days, I spent most of my time distributing the mail, cigarettes, and tinned fruit, which came up from our company headquarters; urging people to take better care of their ambulances; discussing the merits of Paulette Goddard and Mary Martin, and acting as a spare driver for various people. I didn't get much sleep, since most of the hard work came at night, especially for the cars attached to the 6th Brigade, which were making quite a few R.A.P. evacuations.

These trips out to the battalions weren't much fun. One of the New Zealand orderlies got killed the second night, which put the wind up in some of the orderlies attached to our cars, making it necessary for me to report two of them to the medical officers. I had a bad habit of worrying like an old hen whenever an ambulance would go out on a mission which

seemed to me at all dangerous—not as a matter of sentiment or affection, but rather because it took me some time to get used to a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, particularly since in this case I was supposed to have seen to it that these fellows were properly trained to cope with any situation. My excessive anxiety cut down on my sleeping time considerably.

For three days the New Zealanders kept on attacking, taking their objectives and consolidating them with machine-like precision, and on the third day they were withdrawn into temporary reserve. I took advantage of the lull in Field Ambulance work and spent a couple of days with the other half of my platoon attached to the South African C.C.S. Here the boys were putting in a lot of hard work but were somewhat disgruntled over the lack of glamour attached to their job. Fortunately, Doug Atwood, the platoon sergeant, had a knack of getting a good degree of efficiency out of people under almost any conditions, and I didn't have to bother myself too much over the familiar moans of the fire-eaters. Of course, the field ambulance drivers coming into headquarters for workshop inspections made life unpleasant by looking down their noses at the C.C.S. boys, but that sort of thing is always normal.

While the New Zealanders were being held back in reserve, the Australians cut off a pocket of Germans northwest of the famous Hill of Jesus, and the Highland Division pushed forward on their left,



thus creating a salient on the northern end of the line. The 6th New Zealand Brigade was again brought up into the lines, and together with the Highlanders and the Home Counties Division they took up the job of exploiting the salient. Since the 5th Brigade was still in reserve, my cars were now divided between the 6th A.D.S. and an English Field Ambulance serving the Durham Light Infantry.

By this time the battle had entered a second phase: Montgomery and company had apparently decided to take a major crack at the enemy in a limited area on the northern end of the line and had concentrated strong infantry forces, backed by a tremendous weight of artillery. The first night of the second phase, the New Zealand Brigade was used to cover the engineers, who were working on the formidable German minefields; the Highland and Home Counties Divisions put on an infantry attack, and the artillery laid down one of the most terrific barrages of history. (It was estimated that there would be a shell landing every eleven and a half yards in one particular sector.)

I spent a good part of that night driving around in an ambulance looking for a battalion which apparently didn't exist. Major Eliot, the C.O. of the 6th A.D.S., had a strange idea that I could find all sorts of units that nobody had ever heard of and was always sending me out on wild goose chases. I didn't really mind, since I was very fond of Major Eliot, but it was a little embarrassing to find myself

wandering around in the middle of a battle asking foolish questions. On this particular night we went out looking for New Zealanders and came back with an ambulance load of Germans and Scots. There were a lot of Germans walking back along the minefield track that night, some of them supporting wounded comrades, and it was quite a job keeping the healthy ones from climbing in with the wounded.

Early in the morning I left the New Zealand dressing-station and went over to the British station, where Bill Nichols and his boys were attached. I'd seen some strangely located dressing-stations by this time, but this one took the prize. It was set up right near a minefield bottle-neck, through which a great assortment of tanks, Bren carriers, infantry trucks, ammunition trailers, and anti-aircraft guns was trying to pass with very little success. Not since the days of the retreat had I seen such a concentration of undispersed equipment, and never before had I seen such a number of sitting pigeons for enemy shell-fire. It was almost impossible for a shell to land without hitting something or some one, and there were plenty of them landing.

I'll never be able to figure out why that dressing-station wasn't wiped off the face of the earth, especially since four full coffin-sized boxes of mines were sitting right in between the reception and evacuation tents, but somehow not a single shell landed close enough to the small group of Red Cross tents to do any harm. I soon discovered why the boxes of mines hadn't been moved away; it was because the casual-

ties were pouring in so fast, both from the infantry battalions and from the concentration near the minefields, that not a single orderly or stretcher-bearer could take time out to do the moving.

I found that four of Bill's cars were loaded up and heading for the M.D.S., while Bill was out in the fifth with a boy named Eccy Johnston, at a Durham Light Infantry Battalion. They'd all been going steadily all night. I had a talk with the harried commanding officer and then sent my driver back to the M.D.S. to bring up Chuck Larrow's section, which was waiting around for the 5th New Zealanders to go back into action. Within forty minutes there were ten Field Service ambulances and four English Austins all operating out of that one station—and all of them busy. I spent most of the day carrying stretchers between the ambulances and the reception tent and worrying about Bill Nichols and Eccy Johnston, who kept driving back and forth between one of the R.A.P.'s and the A.D.S., each time passing through the gap in the minefield under heavy shell-fire.

Three battalion doctors were killed that day, including the man that Bill and Eccy were working for, and by mid-day the going got so tough that it was necessary to move the brigade headquarters and the battalion R.A.P. trucks back to within a few hundred yards of the minefield gap. Unfortunately, the major commanding the A.D.S. decided to go out and look for brigade headquarters just after it had changed its location, and picked on Bill Nichols

to give him a ride, since the headquarters had originally been located near Bill's R.A.P. I had just relieved Eccy Johnston and was acting as a spare driver for Bill at the time and therefore managed to get in on one of the nastiest possible rides. I had to take my hat off to Eccy and Bill when I saw the kind of stuff they'd been driving through all day.

We passed through the minefield gap and traveled along a track leading up to the infantry positions. There were plenty of shells plopping about, and it would have been an uncomfortable ride at best, but in this case we no sooner got out west of the minefield than we found ourselves in the middle of a tank battle of sorts. There were about twenty British tanks scattered along the southern side of the track taking pot-shots at a pocket of Germans to the north. The Germans were returning the fire with anti-tank guns that sent out a lively white tracer with shells that seemed to go bouncing along the ground. The major couldn't decide whether to go on or not, but anyhow we drove right in front of a number of tanks, probably spoiling their aim, and then pulled up right in the middle of things before the major finally decided we'd gone far enough.

I thought for a minute that he'd given up the whole idea of finding brigade headquarters, but not at all—he simply climbed out of the ambulance, adjusted his snappy garrison cap at a jaunty angle, and announced his intention of taking the next few hundred yards to the supposed location of headquarters on foot. Needless to say, Bill and I didn't sit around

in the ambulance waiting for him to come back. As a matter of fact, he hadn't walked ten yards before we were making our way toward a vacant slit trench. The major strolled along for about ten minutes with a beautiful, though foolish, disregard for life and limb, and then returned with the news that the brigade headquarters had withdrawn and was now well to the east of us.

We finally found the headquarters situated on the western side of the minefield, amid a large concentration of trucks and guns such as I had first noticed on the other side, near the A.D.S. This concentration was also drawing a good deal of German shell-fire. In fact, the shelling was so effective that while we were waiting for the major to finish talking to the bigwigs, we gathered one load of casualties on the spot, evacuated them to the A.D.S., and filled up the ambulance again.

I saw an interesting sight while Bill was driving the first load of wounded back to the A.D.S. and I was waiting to catch the major in case he should come looking for the ambulance. A truck-load of infantry was proceeding westward on the same track we had been traveling when a flurry of shells prompted the men to pull up, leap out, and take to the ground. A disagreeable sergeant-major started shouting about and ordering the men back on to the truck—all to no avail. Three times he ordered them to get going, and three times they completely disregarded him. Then a nonchalant-looking young officer—I think he was the brigade major—came saun-

tering along with a map under his arm and quietly but firmly said: "Get back on that lorry." Without a moment's hesitation they climbed on board and went on their way.

Shortly after this incident I had a chance to disprove the old theory that it's no use ducking when you hear a shell, because "you'll never hear the one that's close enough to hit you." I was sitting on the edge of a big slit trench when I heard the familiar noise which has been likened to everything from a whistle to the roar of an express train, only this time it was obviously louder and closer than usual. I automatically ducked behind the pile of earth heaped up on the side of the trench, and as I did so a fragment imbedded itself with a loud smack just about where my bottom had been resting a split second before—and I know that was the same shell I had heard coming, because there had been a single explosion immediately followed by a lull which lasted for at least three or four minutes.

The major eventually returned from his pow-wow, and we made our way back to the dressing-station on an ambulance so loaded with wounded that it was necessary for me to ride on the mudguard. The narrow track through the minefield had been so chewed up by heavy traffic that there was a layer of fine, powdery dust at least six inches thick covering the hard desert surface, dust which was so churned up by every passing vehicle that at times it was impossible to see three feet in front. Most of the overworked tracks in the limited area behind the

Alamein line were in the same condition in those days, and a large proportion of the Eighth Army went around looking as though they had been dipped in a barrel of tinted flour.

By nightfall the pressure on the British A.D.S. had let up considerably. Apparently the tanks had done a good job during the afternoon, and in the evening the infantry was able to keep the situation well under control, suffering very few casualties in the process.

The Durham Light Infantry was withdrawn in the morning, and our brief attachment to the British Field Ambulance was ended. Chuck Larrow's section rejoined the 5th New Zealander A.D.S., and I split Bill Nichols' cars between the two New Zealand stations. We had a couple more days of routine work (again I spent a night on one of Major Eliot's wild goose chases) and then the break-through came. On our last day "on the line," word spread that the Army had broken through and the Allied Air Forces were giving Rommel's boys a fair idea of how it feels to be on the receiving end of the kind of punishment that had been inflicted on the refugee-packed roads of France.

In keeping with tradition, the New Zealand Division was picked to lead the infantry break-through—the general idea being that we were supposed to make a mad dash some thirty miles west and then northwest to an escarpment commanding the coast road along which the Axis forces were retreating. Also in keeping with tradition, we made a good try

but never got there. I think we were all expecting this to be a really hair-raising experience; I know that I was mentally preparing myself for a large-scale repeat of the Minquar Quam ambush, but somehow it was all rather an anti-climax. If things had gone according to schedule we would have started out at noon and been in position to cut off a good portion of the German forces by first light the next morning, but of course we didn't get through the Axis defenses until well after dark, and when we did get through we spent most of the night getting unstuck from a series of unusually bad patches of soft sand. I was riding with Father Kingan, the Roman Catholic padre attached to the 6th Brigade, since it had seemed best to leave my own truck behind, but I spent as much time out of the car as I did in it, running back along the column looking for stray ambulances.

The first night of the great adventure turned out to be really a very irritating experience: not that any of us were at all blasé about it at the time—God knows we expected to be set upon from all sides every time we saw a flare in the sky—but just that we had expected to make a sensational dash, and here we were jogging along at a rate of two miles per hour.

At dawn we were still a good fifteen miles away from our original destination and getting nowhere fast. Apparently the brains of the army had figured we were too late to go through with the encircling movement at that point so we didn't make for the



coast road at all that day but kept on moving slowly to the west. By this time every one was impatient to catch up to the Germans before they could make a complete getaway, and there was a good deal of comment about our poky progress, but on the whole the daylight served to lift our spirits considerably. It was a wonderful feeling to be out from behind the Axis wall that had confined us through the summer months, and to be out in the open spaces again—even if the open spaces didn't amount to much more than endless stretches of sand and rocks. The British and Imperial soldiers had always referred to the western desert as the "Blue," and once again it struck me as a strikingly appropriate name: miles and miles of nothingness with seemingly no limits—no beginning and no ending.

We didn't travel very far that day but saw a lot of people who really weren't going anywhere. In other words, the Germans had literally filched a good part of the Italian transport right out from under them, and there were sizable groups of forlorn-looking warriors scattered all over the desert, mostly just sitting around scratching themselves. It was really quite an amusing sight and very good for our morale.

I personally spent a very enjoyable day riding with Father Kingan, who was in rare good form and gave vent to his good spirits by frequently breaking into song in one of the most delightful voices I have ever heard. When he wasn't singing he was telling me about New Zealand and the rugby team he'd

coached at Saint Patrick's College. He was not only a good singer but also an exceptional talker. I've never met a New Zealander who couldn't talk about his homeland with convincing enthusiasm, but Father Kingan had such an exceptional gift of description that it wouldn't have taken much to persuade me to shift my national allegiance. As a matter of fact, if he'd tried hard enough, he probably could have sold me the Catholic Church to boot.

We kept crawling along until the middle of the night, when the column halted and Major Eliot gave orders to dig in and get some sleep. Smoking was strictly forbidden, since, according to Major Eliot, we were "in full view of the enemy." I remember we thought that last was a bit of sensationalism, but we found out differently in the morning, when a group of Germans started letting off machine-guns in our direction. It was only a matter of seconds before the division anti-tank and machine-gunners were racing out in the direction of the fire and only a matter of minutes before they had literally wiped out the foolhardy attackers. Aside from some minor incidents on the first night out, to the best of my knowledge this was the only aggressive action directed at our column from the time we passed through the Alamein line to the time, some four days later, when one battalion of the 5th Brigade cleared out a delaying force of Italian infantry and German gunners on the heights of Halfaya (or Hellfire) Pass above Solum. A remarkable thing, when one considers that

most of the time we were passing through territory which was still largely in enemy hands.

We made very poor progress during the next two days, running into some unusually rainy weather which not only bogged down the vehicles but also made it impossible for the service corps to bring up sufficient supplies of gasoline to expedite our progress. On the seventh of November we were thrilled to hear of the American landings in Northwest Africa. The news was just too good to be true, and at first we either discredited it completely or figured it must be only a large-scale raid, but when the truth was known there was great rejoicing, and all the fighting troops were anxious to press on toward the west to wreak a personal vengeance on the Africa Corps and get to Tripoli ahead of the new-comers.

The 6th Brigade stopped to occupy Mersa Matruh on the eighth of November. Half of our ambulances followed them in with the 6th A.D.S., and I went on toward Bardia with the ambulances attached to the 5th A.D.S. We traveled mainly by the coast road, after by-passing Matruh—noting with special satisfaction the great quantities of burned-out enemy equipment strewn along for mile after mile. It was really fine to be playing on a winning team for a change. When we arrived at Solum there was a tremendous jam-up of traffic waiting to get through Halfaya Pass and continue the chase into Libya. Rommel's engineers or our own air force had blasted the winding portion of the coast road that led over

Solum hill, rendering it temporarily impassable, and we were obliged to cool our heels at the foot of Halfaya (the only alternate route into Libya), while the infantry cleaned up a delaying force that was holding the pass and until our proper turn should come to join the brigade column.

There was an amusing incident which served to lighten the strain of our impatience. Long lines of prisoners had been herded down the pass during the early morning hours, and by mid-morning it seemed that most of the Axis troops in the area had been collected and sent back to the rear. But such was not the case. About noontime a forlorn-looking group of two Italians and one German came shuffling along with handkerchiefs tied to their shirts and white rags in their hands. There was no question but that they intended to surrender. The awkward thing about it for them was that they couldn't find any one to surrender to. No one would pay any attention to them:

Looking like three small boys who had just wet their pants and were waiting to be punished, they went and stood in front of a military policeman who was busy directing traffic. Of course, the M.P. didn't even notice them. Finally a smart-looking captain walked over and led the prisoners up to a little group of very senior officers who were taking an interest in the proceedings. The senior officers were Generals Alexander, Montgomery and Lumsden. The prisoners seemed to take heart, assumed a military bearing, and snapped to rigid attention in front

of the generals. This was the way to surrender: they would be able to tell their grandchildren, "It took a full general to capture me!"

But if they were temporarily inflated with a sense of special importance, it wasn't to last for long. One of the generals took up a camera, carefully adjusted the lens, and took a snapshot of this miniature Axis Army. Then he handed the camera to an aide, turned on his heel, and walked away, leaving the captives looking like so many deflated balloons. It was a very funny sight. Of course, it's mean to laugh at the discomfort of others, but it was gratifying to see just how insignificant three ex-"world conquerors" could look, and anyhow I knew they would soon be enjoying three meals a day and safe billets for the duration.

Our turn to go through the pass came the afternoon after this little incident, and by evening we had set up camp a few miles outside Bardia. We had picked up a number of wounded German artillerymen as we drove through Capuzzo at the top of the pass, and that evening I had a good chance to talk to some of them. One of our Field Service boys had gone to school in Germany and acted as interpreter.

The Germans seemed remarkably well informed: they knew more about the American landings in North Africa than we did, and besides genuine information had a ready store of "facts" about the number of Allied ships sunk in the Mediterranean. They all seemed happy enough to be out of the war

and said that they were anxious for the war to end so that they could get home, *but they refused to admit that there was any possibility of a German defeat.* They seemed friendly enough, and not at all arrogant, but were firm in their conviction of invincibility. I asked one of them if the Alamein attack had been a surprise. In a way it had: they had expected something, but nothing so big.

One of the Germans who could speak some English asked me if I too didn't wish that the war would end so that I could return to my family. When I replied that of course I did, he beamed all over.

On the day after we had set up camp I made a trip into Bardia with Major Dempsey, who was commanding the 5th A.D.S. Bardia had once been a pretty little town of modern white houses set on a high promontory overlooking the Mediterranean, but the war and particularly the Italian Army occupation had made a great difference. A surprising number of houses were still standing, and there were portions of the town which might have been habitable if it weren't for the fact that Italian occupation had rendered them unfit for a monkey to live in. There were piles and rows of human excretion all over that town—not only outdoors, but also in the very rooms of the "habitable" dwellings. Apparently it is a concession to sanitation when an Italian soldier goes to the trouble to take down his pants. The army must do something to Italians. It seems to me that Italian civilians must be decent enough folk

(at least clean enough), or they wouldn't have built such a nice town originally.

We picked up a lot of Italian wine in Bardia and some fairly good German brandy, and that night every one in the company had a big binge, in the course of which Major Dempsey poured a good deal of wine down my back.

The 5th New Zealand Brigade established a reserve area outside Bardia and took a long rest, together with the 6th Brigade which shortly came up from Matruh. Apparently the high command was saving the New Zealanders for later operations, and it wasn't long before the entire Eighth Army, including the rest of the American Field Service, had passed us and gone on toward the west. The South African C.C.S., that had the rest of my platoon and our company headquarters and workshops attached, paused outside Bardia for a few days, so I had a chance to have the cars belonging to my field ambulance sections overhauled by the workshops. While the operation was getting on, I had some long talks with Captain Andy Geer. Andy had made up his mind to leave the Field Service during this lull in the fighting and go home to transfer into the American Forces. I had been carrying on some negotiations with the Navy in recent months and had always planned to leave the Field Service as soon as I should have completed my obligations. Now I felt that, in a sense, my job was done. My new platoon was thoroughly experienced, there was very

little ambulance work to be done for the present, and if I were ever going to make the break, this seemed as good a time as any. Therefore I told Andy that I'd like to head for home at such time as he deemed advisable. Andy wanted to get to Benghazi before turning his back on the desert campaign, so we agreed that once that had been accomplished we'd head for Cairo and home.

I hung around Bardia for a couple of weeks, sleeping most of the day and playing black-jack with the New Zealanders at night. Then I turned my platoon over to Doug Atwood, said good-by to my New Zealand friends and the A.F.S. boys I'd grown so proud of, and headed for company headquarters, which by this time had reached Benghazi.

The drive to Benghazi was a very happy one. Furthermore, it was good to pass through battered Tobruk, where we had first joined the desert forces, and to travel through the country to the west that I had never seen before. Of course a lot of it looked just the same until we passed to the south of Derna: but what a difference then! All of a sudden the desert ends and you enter a stretch of fertile country with green and rolling hills, cultivated fields, and fruit trees. I hadn't seen anything like that since leaving Syria in April.

On the twenty-eighth of November Andy and I and a few others who were on their way home, made a quick sight-seeing trip around Benghazi, which looked very much like the European quarters of Alexandria, except that it was deserted and had been



badly battered—and then made a mad dash for Cairo. We drove the six hundred and fifty some miles over war-torn roads back to Cairo in thirty-six hours—looking neither to the right nor to the left. Just hell bent for home.

## *Chapter IX*

### GOING HOME

Once you've started home after being away for over a year you get a sort of fever which is like nothing else in the world, especially if you expect to keep on moving without delay and then run across nothing but one delay after another. When I first got to Cairo and reported to the Field Service General Headquarters I was informed that I could expect to sail within five days. I went to a service corps camp near Port Tewfik and waited for three weeks. After the first five days it looked as though there might be some chance of getting off ten days later. Still no luck. At the end of three weeks I hitched a ride back to Cairo and stormed into the A.F.S. headquarters to ask why in God's name I hadn't been put on one of the many boats which I knew had been sailing from Tewfik harbor. It seemed to me that since I had stayed over my enlistment period the Field Service ought to move heaven and earth to get me home. I got so mad that I began to really feel sorry for myself and worked up a lot of emotion about how I'd been out in the desert "taking my chances, while those bastards sat on their bottoms in Cairo."

No amount of emotion or ranting and raging did

me the slightest bit of good. I guess the Cairo boys were doing their best at a thankless job, but I didn't see it that way at the time. I had the old "going-home" fever, and my general attitude was "To hell with the A.F.S. and every one in it."

Finally it turned out that if I could put up three hundred dollars, to cover any charge which might be made against the Field Service, I could fly as far as the west coast of Africa and take my chances of getting passage from there. My family cabled the money (it was quickly returned, since I traveled on a British movement order as though I were a genuine officer), and, after a dismal Christmas and New Year's in Cairo, I said good-by to my old friend Andy Geer, who was to travel separately, and flew to the west coast in the quick and efficient charge of the United States Air Transport Command. It would be stepping out of line if I were to describe my air route or the location of various fields, but I would like to say that the U. S. Army and Pan American Airways have done a truly remarkable job of building a "bridge across Africa."

On January 10th I landed at a British West African port, where I was met by the British Movements Control Officer, who greeted me with all sorts of courtesy and a promise that I would be flown on to the United States via British Airways within a week. That week stretched out to five weeks, and then I never did get close to a British Airways plane but was eventually flown home by my good friend the United States Air Transport Command.

During my five weeks in West Africa I lived in a British officers' transit camp, conveniently located right alongside the only swamp for miles around which had not as yet been cleared of malaria-bearing mosquitoes. The camp was a dismal collection of huts built out of palm stalks with thatched roofs. I've never lived in such a hot, damp, dismal place in all my life. I'd venture to say that in addition to the unattractive physical aspects it was also one of the worst run transit camps in the British Empire. The two worst features were the mess, in which the food was not even up to the standard of desert rations, and the lack of protection against native thieves, who made regular bi-weekly visits during the dead of night and never failed to get away with considerable sums of money—usually stolen from the clothing of officers, who were sleeping peacefully with their garments draped on pegs beside their cots. I never really had to worry about the thieves myself, because I hadn't any money except when I sold most of my clothes to a Scottish doctor who lived with me toward the end of my stay, and by that time I had sense enough to keep things under my pillow. Nevertheless, I didn't enjoy the idea of having people creeping around while I was in bed. God knows the place was spooky enough as it was, what with rats and lizards and all sorts of bugs crawling around on the walls and roof all night.

The natives around there were hard for me to understand. There was a black servant attached to each hut, and I thought I was getting along first

rate with my "boy" until he found out just how poor I was. You weren't supposed to tip the servants anything according to the camp rules anyway, so I figured out I'd make up for my enforced observance by trying to get along on a friendly footing. He seemed willing enough to play ball until he found just how things stood from the financial point of view, and then he either looked at me with a pitying contempt or sulked in a corner whenever I tried to get any work out of him.

I used to be shocked that the natives called white men "master," and I thought the British officers were downright offensive in their behavior towards the transit camp servants, but apparently, for better or for worse, the blacks were conditioned to it. There was one particular officer at the camp, an "old Africa hand," who used to scream around and call the servants "filthy black bastards" and about everything else you can think of. When he wasn't cussing them out he was joking with them in pidgin English, and one time I came across him helping a little black boy with his Sunday school lessons. Apparently he'd found one kind of formula for handling "conditioned" natives, because they seemed genuinely fond of him, and he got an awful lot of good service.

The native population in the town looked like a self-respecting lot of people and, compared to the poorer Egyptians around Cairo, seemed clean and healthy. Those who could read were delighted to see the embroidered "American Field Service" on my arm. They'd always get the idea across that they

thought America the finest place in the world, and usually wanted to know if it was true that America was going to take over from the English and give them a lot of food and money. I had heard the same kind of talk from Indians, Arabs, and Egyptians. People all over the world seem to be busy loving America better than England these days, but it's mostly because they have a hazy idea that America is going to create heaven on earth after the war. I hope they won't be disillusioned.

I was awfully impatient to get home and hated the transit camp—especially at mealtime or during the hot, sticky nights, but, on the whole, I had some good times in West Africa. I formed a fast friendship with a New Zealand Air Force navigator and a Canadian pilot, who were waiting for a boat to England, and we used to rent bicycles and go to the beach almost every day. There was a terrific surf which was somewhat frightening at first, but once I got used to it I enjoyed the best sea bathing there is.

I had some interesting talks with those two air force boys—especially when we got through the preliminaries of discussing women and sex in general—the main wartime topic of conversation for soldiers, who are always particularly nostalgic for female companionship. I remember discussing the results of the Roosevelt-Churchill Casablanca Conference. None of us was at all pleased with the glib, unqualified phrase, "Unconditional Surrender." It seemed to play right into Hitler's hands, and we felt that it might involve a lot of unnecessary loss of life for the Allies.

We were agreed that the war must be prosecuted until Hitler and all he stood for should be utterly defeated, but it seemed to us that the German people in particular would be far more likely to fight to the last man as long as our high-minded statesmen kept fighting the war with such quick and easy talk. I do not use the word "high-minded" facetiously. The Canadian and New Zealander felt free to criticize Churchill at times, but they still felt that he was about the greatest living hero. I never thought of Roosevelt as a hero, exactly, but I always gave him credit on general principles.

I used to think about Roosevelt and Churchill quite a lot on my own while I had nothing better to do. I came to the surprising (to me) conclusion that Churchill pretty generally has been making Roosevelt look like a monkey when it comes to straight talking. Churchill gets up and frankly states that he has no intention of "presiding over the liquidation of the British Empire." It doesn't sound so fine, but at least he's putting the cards on the table.

Roosevelt, on the other hand, indulges in flights of oratory about all sorts of freedom "everywhere." It sounds fine: it's a good idea, and you've got to give him credit for sincerity, but you never know what he's thinking about from an immediate practical point of view. How soon is the good Lord going to make the American people his special agents? It's all very well to give people something to shoot for, and the Four Freedoms are an excellent goal, but it's a sure thing that there are going to be a lot

of people—especially Africans and Asiatics—who will be looking at the sky and waiting for the U. S. A. to turn on the rain of plenty after this war is over, without getting an awful lot of satisfaction.

It's all very frightening to me. I suppose that Roosevelt really means that we aim to work *with* people "everywhere" *toward* the goals of freedom, and I'm all for him, but about every time I looked at one of those West African natives, I used to imagine that he was already watching for the rain to fall, and I'd think: "Boy, you just don't know the half of it!"

One evening I ran across an educated West African who really seemed to know what he was talking about. I was drinking beer with my two air force friends in a "sailors' hotel" near the harbor, and this fellow was the owner of the place. We were talking of one thing and another when I happened to ask him if he thought it would be best for his country if the British were to pack up and go home.

"Well," he said, "I don't like the British very much, but this is a potentially rich country, and we need some one to show us how to exploit it. The only trouble is that when that happens, then we get exploited along with the country. You can't expect any one nation—even the Americans—to develop a country without wanting to get something out of it."

It seemed to me that he had just about put the problem in a nut-shell. I asked him then just what could be done about it. His answer ran something like this:



"Some day the governments of the world will realize that the natural wealth in this and every other country should be developed to better a universal standard of living. Then, and only then, will the undeveloped areas such as this be exploited for the direct or indirect benefit of all nations."

I'll never forget that West African hotel-keeper. I had left college and traveled half around the world and part way back, and it wasn't till I talked to him in a dirty, rotten barroom in West Africa that some of the cynicism about the "brave new world" dropped from my confused way of thinking and I began to see that perhaps it might turn out to be something more than a bad joke after all.

The conversation that evening made me more anxious than ever to get home in a hurry and see what my own country was like. A lot of water had flowed over the dam since I had left home in November, 1941.

Finally, after five long weeks, the British Movements Control Officer decided that I had very little chance of getting a seat on a British Airways plane and advised me to go to the United States Transport Command Headquarters and "see what your own chaps can do." Within three days I had made contact with a very pleasant American colonel and five days later set foot on American soil for the first time in fifteen-and-a-half months.

I had always dreamed of sailing up New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty. And, at first, when the plane set me down at a Miami airport, I had

the feeling that something was missing from my homecoming. As it turned out, however, a Canadian flying officer, whom I had met on the way down, took me under his wing and saw to it that I had two wonderful days in Palm Beach while waiting for my train to New York. He introduced me to his fiancée, an American girl, and the three of us got along so famously that I ended up as best man at their wedding. There couldn't have been a better way of finding out that, even in wartime, the world can be a very wonderful place.

## *Epilogue*

NEW YORK, 1943

NEW YORK, N. Y., February 23, 1943

*Lt. Eugene W. Mason*

*Lt. Eugene V. Connell*

DEAR BUTCH AND GENE:

I'm home again. As a matter of fact I'm in bed with malaria, which I caught from a hungry mosquito while stranded in British West Africa on the way back. It didn't hit me until after I got home, but now I've got it good and proper. I'd been hoping to get right into the Navy, but I guess that will have to wait for a while now. In the meantime I'm lying here, listening to the radio and trying to get acquainted with the latest sentimental tunes.

You're probably wondering whether I think I've learned all the answers I was looking for when you saw me last. No, I didn't learn all of them, but I did learn some. I learned that war is just about as bad as I thought it was going to be, but then again it's not *all* bad. Men learn that they can't live alone in wartime—that they depend on others, particularly

the respect of others, and that sense of dependence can do wonders. For one thing, it can help men to be brave when they're frightened almost to the point of paralysis. For another thing, it can teach men a type of tolerance. You seldom find real soldiers worrying about races or creeds, or even about the other fellow's mannerisms. The almighty individual is not so sure of himself when he gets a little shaken up. Some day the things men learn in wartime will stick, and then there won't be any more wars.

I learned to have a high regard for and almost an understanding of, people of other nations. Take the English for example. I wouldn't want to be an Englishman for anything in the world, but I found that the average Englishman has a courage, a will to "carry on," and a passion for freedom that will see him through far greater storms than this.

I learned that the dream of a better world, after this war is over, may have some substance to it after all.

And then I've learned something about coming home. At first I was discouraged when I rode north on a train from Florida and listened to soldiers and civilians fighting the war with their mouths. At first I was discouraged when I read the papers and listened to the radio. There's so much talk and so much writing about the war. At first I didn't know what war they were talking and writing about. It didn't seem to be the same war I came back from. They talk and write as though the war was almost over and America was winning it single-handed (with a little help from Russia). *and allies*

It took me a few days to get over the smell of so much talk and print, but now I think I've figured it out. I've learned that it's all a boiling over of a spirit that's essentially American. The nation of people who have been brought up to never tip their hats to anybody has gone to war. Now we're very noisy and very cocky. At first, coming straight from close association with Englishmen and New Zealanders, I thought it all very shocking. Now I see it differently. It would be a bad sign if Americans were not full of beans at this time. As far as we're concerned, it's *our* war now, and *we'll* see it through.

Now I'll ask you something. What are we going to do with all the beans we've got inside us when the war is over?

Think it over for a couple of years and let me know. . . .

(1)











# AMBULANCE IN AFRICA

*By* EVAN THOMAS

Here is youth in arms—an intelligent American fighting the good fight and writing down his honest, clear-cut impressions of men known and things seen. Evan Thomas left Princeton in October, 1941, when he was a Senior and Captain of the Crew, to join the American Field Service. His book is the story of his travels and work in the Near East and Africa.

A month before Pearl Harbor, Evan Thomas sailed for the Middle East with the first group of American ambulance drivers to be attached to the British forces. He spent two months on a troopship, a month in India, two months in Syria, and then became attached to the British Eighth Army in the Western desert the following May.

Thomas got out of Tobruk two days before the British surrender in June of 1942, retreated into Egypt, joined the New Zealand division and served with it through the delaying action west of the Alamein line and the summer fighting. In February he flew back to the United States, spending a month in Nigeria on the way.

In telling his story he gives a clear picture of the life of an American college boy serving with the British Imperial forces.

## EVAN THOMAS

Evan Thomas, the son of Norman Thomas, has crammed a lifetime of activity into his twenty-three years. The summer after his graduation from the Kent School in 1938 he travelled to England as Captain and Coxswain of the Kent School crew, which won the Thames Challenge Cup at the Henley Royal Regatta. During summer vacations he served as sailing instructor at the Cold Spring Harbor Beach Club and Devon Yacht Club.

In the fall of 1938 he entered Princeton, majoring in Political Science, and achieved honors at the end of his Junior year. He was Captain of the 1941 Princeton University crew and Captain-elect of the 1942 crew.

Since leaving Princeton, Thomas has served with the American Field Service in India, Syria, Egypt and Libya. At the time he left the American Field Service he held the rank of 1st Lieutenant, commanding a platoon of thirty ambulances. After his return from Africa he was ill for some time with malaria. He is now an Ensign in the U. S. N. R.

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